

From Lillian Eugenia Smith

10 March 1956
Neptune Beach, Fla.

Smith was a white novelist, journalist, and civil rights activist from Georgia. Her controversial 1944 novel Strange Fruit, about an interracial love affair in the Deep South, was banned in Boston and Detroit but became a best-seller.¹ After commending King for leading the bus boycott “wisely and well,” she offers “just a spoonful of advice: don’t let outsiders come in and ruin your movement,” particularly “northern do-gooders.” Having received no response to her letter, Smith wrote again on 3 April, telling King that “I am urging the white southerners who believe in your way to let you know they do; that it is important for them to take a stand within their own hearts as well as for your group in Montgomery.” On 24 May King finally replied, thanking Smith for her encouragement and financial support.²

Dear Dr. King:

I have with a profound sense of fellowship and admiration been watching your work in Montgomery. I cannot begin to tell you how effective it seems to me, although I must confess I have watched it only at long distance.

It is the right way. Only through persuasion, love, goodwill, and firm nonviolent resistance can the change take place in our South. Perhaps in a northern city

1. Lillian Eugenia Smith (1897–1966), born in Jasper, Florida, briefly attended Piedmont College in Georgia and studied music at Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore. She taught at a missionary school in China from 1922 to 1925. After returning to the United States she assumed leadership of Laurel Falls Camp, the elite girls’ school her parents founded in Georgia. Committed to nonviolent racial reform, she was active in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and the Southern Conference for Human Welfare.

2. See pp. 273–274 in this volume.

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this kind of nonviolent, persuasive resistance would either be totally misinterpreted or else find nothing in the whites which could be appealed to. But in our South, the whites, too, share the profoundly religious symbols you are using and respond to them on a deep level of their hearts and minds. Their imaginations are stirred: the waters are troubled.

You seem to be going at it in such a wise way. I want to come down as soon as I can and talk quietly with you about it. For I have nothing to go on except television reports and newspaper reports. But these have been surprisingly sympathetic to the 40,000 Negroes in Montgomery who are taking part in this resistance movement. But I have been in India twice; I followed the Gandhian movement long before it became popular in this country. I, myself, being a Deep South white, reared in a religious home and the Methodist church realize the deep ties of common songs, common prayer, common symbols that bind our two races together on a religio-mystical level, even as another brutally mythic idea, the concept of White Supremacy, tears our two people apart.

Ten years ago, I wrote Dr. Benjamin Mays in Atlanta suggesting that the Negroes begin a non-violent religious movement. But the time had not come for it, I suppose. Now it is here; now it has found you and others perhaps, too, in Montgomery who seem to be steering it wisely and well.

I want to help you with money just as soon as I can; I cannot, just now; I have had cancer for three years and have been unable to make much of a living during this time; also have found it an expensive illness. My home, also, was burned this winter by two young white boys; and this fire destroyed all my writings, manuscripts, work in progress, books, records, 7000 letters on race relations etc. etc. But I will have a turn of luck soon, I hope, and just as soon as I do I shall send your group some money.

In lieu of money, I send my encouragement and just a spoonful of advice: don't let outsiders come in and ruin your movement. This kind of thing has to be indigenous; it has to be kept within the boundaries of the local situation. You know the fury a northern accent arouses in the confused South—especially if that accent goes along with a white face. Keep the northern ~~ern~~ do-gooders {sincere and honest as they may be} out; tell them to help you with their publicity in the North, giving you a sympathetic and honest press; tell them to send money if they are able to do so; tell them to try to use some of these methods in their northern communities. But don't, please, my friend, let them come down and ruin what you are doing so well. It will then seem to the country a "conspiracy" instead of a spontaneous religio-social movement. It has had a tremendous effect on the conscience of the people everywhere. But it won't have, if these people come in.

Dr. Homer Jack has written a most sympathetic news-letter about his visit. I was glad he wrote it. But I think his advice for northern "experts" in non-violence to go down and help is unwise. You can't be an expert in non-violence; it is like being a saint or an artist: each person grows his own skill and expertness. I think Howard Thurmond could be of help, perhaps, to you. He is truly a great man; warm, deeply religious. Bayard Rustin is a fine man, too.³ Whoever comes should come

3. In his 9 March newsletter to "those interested in the non-violent resistance aspects of the Montgomery, Alabama protest against segregation on the city buses," Jack suggested that "certain well-

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only on invitation and should give only quiet advice. Except Howard Thurman. Mr Thurman, as I said, is a truly great religious leader. Your congregation and that of other ministers in Montgomery would respond to him. He would encourage them in numerous ways and his advice would be wise and skilled. I think, instead of coming, if these leaders of CORE (with whom I have worked for years) would write you letters; send messages of encouragement to your group that that would in the end help more than anything else. You have the awe and respect of many southern whites at present; they are genuinely touched and amazed at the discipline, the self-control, the dignity, the sweetness and goodness and courage and firmness of your group. It would break my heart were so-called "outsiders" to ruin it all. The white South is irrational about this business of "outsiders." ~~It can turn itself~~

But please give your group a message from me: Tell them that Lillian Smith respects and admires what they are doing. Tell them, please, that I am deeply humbled by the goodwill, the self discipline, the courage, the wisdom of this group of Montgomery Negroes. Tell them that I, too, am working as hard as I can to bring insight to the white group; to try to open their hearts to the great harm that segregation inflicts not only on Negroes but on white people too. Tell them, that I hope and pray that they will keep their resistance on a high spiritual level of love and quiet courage; for these are the only way that a real change of heart and mind can come to our South.

Sincerely,
[*signed*] Lillian Smith

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known Gandhians," such as Amiya Chakravarty, Richard Gregg, George Houser, Ralph Templin, and Howard Thurman, counsel MIA leaders "on Gandhian philosophy and techniques." Jack noted that Rustin had already been to Montgomery and seemed "especially effective in counseling the leader of the protest during the crucial 2 weeks after the mass arrests. . . . His contribution to interpreting the Gandhian approach to the leadership cannot be overestimated." King referred to Smith's advice in a subsequent letter to Thurman (see King to Thurman, 16 March 1956, p. 177 in this volume).