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Elaine DeLott Baker, 7/20/97

**A NOTE TO READERS:** The following is a journal entry that I wrote after the initial meeting of the group in Hunting Island, in 1995. Connie Curry had relayed a question from Julian Bond, "Why you?" The following response was written in first person plural, but it is a personal perspective, and in particular, a northern one. I have not figured out how to incorporate it into the text yet as a first person statement, but felt it was worth including here.  
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People have asked us, "Why you? What made you respond to the call, to place yourself at risk in the civil rights movement?" It is a very threatening question to us, carrying the danger that in answering it we perpetuate the myth, the myth that somehow we were different from other people, that somehow we were "heroes". The very essence of our experience as whites in the black struggle was that we were not the heroes, that we were witnesses carried along in a great wave of black strength, courage, and integrity. So we have been reluctant to answer, for this and other reasons. The interest of the "press", and later, "the historians" was too reminiscent of the reality that white lives had greater public meaning than black lives. We had all suffered when the deaths of two white civil rights workers and one black civil rights worker meant more to an American public than the systematic series of black deaths, before and after the tragedy at Meridian. We saw our involvement in the Movement as an accidental privilege of the most precious kind, but please, don't embarrass us and perpetuate injustice by viewing our actions as something to be singled out and praised.

Still, the question of "why us" remains an intriguing one. It is true that there were only a few hundred white women involved in direct action in the early civil rights movement in the south. So why us and not the other hundreds of thousands of young white women our age? In some way this book is an attempt to answer that question.

In looking back at our lives before the Movement we have been able to identify parts of ourselves that were drawn to the ideology and action of the Movement. It may not be possible to answer the question of why others didn't go, but perhaps we can answer the question of why we did, the question of what it was in us that resonated with the values of the movement, what it was that spoke to us and carried us into its heart, and what it was in our lives that intersected with the events of the times.

In truth, we were different, and then again, not that different from so many others like us. In the end it was a confluence of something inside us, and of opportunity. I believe that there are young people everywhere that grow up feeling like something is wrong in their society, that there are contradictions between what they are taught and what they see. I think it was true then, it is true now, it has been true throughout history, and it will be true forever. It is the

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reason that I have hope and the reason I do not despair, even in these times. Young people are born afresh, in each generation, surrounded by the truth and by the lies, amidst the eternal promise of youth that perhaps they will be the ones that will make things right.

In that way I think we were a few amongst many, many, many young white women, in both North and South. There was something in each of us that had a deep connection with social, ethical, or religious morality, something that had to do with understanding right and wrong. When we speak to each other about our lives as young girls, we can recognize in each other a basic belief in a moral universe, the moral universe we learned as children from our families, our religious teachers, and from other influences in our young lives.

Beyond that, so much seemed to be an accident. For us to believe in a moral universe was not particularly unusual. I would expect that most young children grow up believing in a moral universe. Far less of them think about the discrepancy between what they see around them and what they have been taught. In some sense, this is the "first cut". If the universe does not harbor contradictions, then all is well. Still, I believe there are young adults in every high school in America who question their society. Certainly there were others like me in my high school, so the question remains. Why did I end up in Mississippi instead of them?

I think of a large pool of young women with strong ethical beliefs in their early twenties. Who will end up in Mississippi? First, they would have to be the kind of individuals who were likely to act independently. Then remove the ones who wouldn't do something that their parents disapproved of for fear of hurting or displeasing them. Then remove the ones who were involved with partners who would disapprove of such actions. Then remove the ones who didn't have the means to be mobile. Then, there is still the question of access. How many of those who were left were in the right place at the right time to connect with someone or some organization that would carry them south? I think of a huge pool of women, not unlike us in our core attitudes and beliefs, who at each step of the way, were narrowed by circumstance into an ever smaller group. In the end, I believe that it was the intersection of our experiences and the times that carried us into the movement, and not any special quality that we alone possessed.

In that way, we are more characteristic of our generation than the ways in which history portrays us. We know that. For many of us from the North, we knew that our high school or college friends looked at us in admiration for doing what they wished they could have done. We were still the "girls next door", but we were changed by our experiences, and we became separate, further and further from our pasts, our friends, our families, and our society. We became fugitives from the culture. But that came later. In the beginning we were different, but not that different. I think if we can convey that message it will be easier to speak about the rest. We want to speak because we believe it will happen again, a time when ordinary

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young people will feel compelled by what they see to do something in opposition to society.  
They are our audience.

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