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# Bernard D. Mayes

Bernard Mayes was director of the Judson Student House from 1958 to 1960.

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In 1958 Robert Spike and Robert Newman returned to New York from shooting material for a film about experimental parishes in Great Britain. They had visited Leeds, where I was working as an Anglican priest in the “house church” movement. One of the results of their visit was that Howard Moody and the Judson Board invited me to be the director of the Student House. I had never been to the United States, and the visit changed my life and that of many others.

I arrived on Labor Day. After twenty-seven years in a Britain depleted first by depression and then war and burdened with its crippling class structure and its homophobia, racism, and antisemitism, New York presented me with an entirely new world, splendid, vigorous, open. Within days of my arrival, the *Village Voice* interviewed me and asked me to write about my first impressions of America. The editor told me he agreed with Howard that things were going wrong, and he was interested in my objective view of things. These were things I still knew nothing about, and my enthusiastic article on behalf of America was inevitably rejected.

## STUDENTS, FAITHS, SEXES

At the Student House I found a curious collection of undergraduate students, most attending New York University. They represented many faiths and several sexes. One student appeared to be a princess from India. She refused even to talk to another Indian student because he was of a lower caste and belabored me for doing so; that I was the director seemed to her to reinforce her complaints. Home-sick for her entourage, she would commandeer the phonograph, upon which she would play never-ending Indian ragas. For this she would wear a purple and green sari shot with silver while sitting cross-legged on a silk cushion.

Another student was an angry, uncooperative Jewish atheist with whom I had endless arguments while we both stood in the corridor clutching plastic glasses of wine. Our intellectual positions were both so convincing that in the end we seemed to have exchanged them—he for Christianity and I for Judaism.

There was also a white student who was very much in love with an African-American woman whom he was determined to marry, despite the times. I saw nothing wrong with this and was surprised to learn that everyone feared for their safety. The woman had a friend who was keen to show me the real world, and together we drove to Washington, D.C., only to discover that, because my companion was black, none of the better restaurants would let us through their doors. I was appalled and demanded entrance. She kept pulling me away. "It's I who will be punished, not you," she told me, "anyway, I am hungry and I want dinner not the police."

My apartment in the house consisted of a couple of large rooms painted blood orange. It was no doubt this repellent color, combined with the fact that the walls contained large bulges suggestive of buried bodies, that had caused the rooms to be known as the one-time bedroom of Edgar Allen Poe. It was here, in the midst of the Village fleshpots, that I was able to entertain the first gay friends and lovers of my life. When Howard learned about it, he waxed philosophical. "Why should I prevent you from making love in church property," he said, "when we make love in it, too?" In those days, that was something, and it showed how revolutionary Judson was, as well as what a great leader Howard had become.

## LEARNING AMERICAN VALUES

Unexpectedly, it was food rather than love affairs that occupied the minds of most students. They seemed able to eat anything and everything at all times. We had a common refrigerator into which they stuffed open cans, open bags, and open bottles. People took whatever they wanted. Some of the cans looked so poisonously old that I feared for my charges' health, and I put up a notice "Open cans must not be left to rot." The following morning I found that someone had scrawled a swastika on the message. Americans, I was told, object to words like "must." Even in matters of life and death, one

should say "please." It was another lesson in American values. Judson had broken through my priggish, prudish upbringing and was determined to teach me about life as it was meant to be lived in the Village.

Taking my cue on Halloween, I went all the way and dressed in full but unconventional drag. I went as a witch, complete with broomstick. Another Judsonite joined me as a six-foot-two *femme fatale*. Together we toured the Village, stopping traffic. On returning to the house, I was met by our Indian princess, who demanded penance by way of two hours of ragas.

## SNOW AND THE PARK

One New Year's morning, I woke up to a strange silence that seemed to have descended upon the house and the streets alike. On getting up, I found that I was unable to open the front door to Thompson Street: It was blocked by two feet of snow. Manhattan had become a fairyland decorated in a brilliant white blanket that shimmered beneath a sky as blue as a cornflower. What cars had been left out could be detected only by the humps in a snowfield that stretched way up Fifth Avenue from one side of the street to another. After I had pushed the door open wide enough to get out, it was only to be half buried in a sparkling drift (the wind blows around that corner!). Beautiful though the winter scene was and seemingly ideal for snowballs, not a soul was outside and I soon realized why. After no more than 100 yards up Fifth Avenue, I was hiding in doorways, my face frozen solid. The temperature was around zero. Snowballs were out of the question. I staggered back to the house, where everyone was gathered around the burping steam radiators. Later that day we held a dance in the kitchen.

In the spring of 1960 Governor Nelson Rockefeller, aided and abetted by the local Residents' Council, was planning the takeover of Washington Square Park by private developers. Accordingly, the students and I quickly found ourselves caught up in a demonstration to "Free the Square." We were met by riot police armed with helmets and truncheons. It was a hint of the sixties to come. The press took pictures of us being manhandled. But we won, and the park has been free ever since.

## A TRIP TO THE SOUTH

At some point, the Judson Board arranged for me to reconnoiter the South. I was told that the Judson congregation was eager to learn what was happening on the frontier. Because I was in New York, the BBC had invited me to report back to America, and accordingly I broadcast to Britain every week. If I was going south, why not begin by interviewing the new explorers of outer space being trained in Virginia? That was certainly a new frontier. After that, I could move on to Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, and interview the Jordans, who were running the only racially integrated farm in the United States. The night before I left, Judson's students bought me my first American pizza and wished me luck. Some thought I would never return.

At Langley Field in Virginia, where America's first astronauts were training, I was put inside a space suit, whirled around in a centrifuge, and strapped inside the very space capsule itself. I even interviewed Gus Grissom (in the shower of all places), the astronaut who was later burned to death. The Cold War was well on its way and, naive as I was, even I could see that space itself might become the battlefield of the future. It was a heady experience with all the world breathlessly looking on.

But the Jordans (pronounced Jerdans) were also risking their lives. Americus is a small town famous for its nut trees. It sits in the midst of dry Georgian plains surrounded by nut orchards and hay fields. I was met by the patriarch of Koinonia Farm, Clarence Jordan, who warned me, with much shaking of the head, that regularly every week, the farm buildings were invaded by the Klan, whose trucks drove around the farm buildings firing shotguns through the windows. I could hardly believe such a wildly western story. To an Englishman, the Ku Klux Klan seemed more an American throwback than a force to be reckoned with. As I was to learn, the fact that blacks and whites all worked and dined together at Koinonia Farm made it a very dangerous place to be.

At the Jordans' invitation, I joined the work force, picking and packing pecans (a nut I had never seen before). I made friends with the pickers, black and white, and had long discussions about the strange southern states. At night we all dined together. One evening we could hear in the distance a honking of horns accompanied by

raucous shouts and war-whoops. I thought it must be a party somewhere, but as if in a World War II raid, everyone in the room dived under the tables. Jordan pulled me down with him even as into the farm area came trucks, roaring and skidding around the farm buildings, shotguns exploding, glass smashing, the shouts and whoops suddenly near and terrifying. Under the tables, children and some women were crying with terror while all the menfolk looked haggard and somewhat sheepish but also furious at wanting to do something but fearing to be lynched. Then the trucks roared away, and we climbed back to our meal.

Clarence Jordan had warned me not to go near the local Baptist church because it was the Klan's headquarters, and their welcome was unlikely to be warm. Not believing that self-respecting Baptists could actually be members of the Ku Klux Klan, I took off on a blazing hot Sunday morning for the worship service at the pretty salt-box church surrounded by a white picket fence.

## FANS AND BATS

Inside the little wooden building the air was stifling, but the long white pews of pine and cedar gave off a warm, friendly scent. The congregation was clearly a farm crowd. The men were tall or round, dressed in well-worn dark suits, their faces lined and solemn. The women were either large or thin, with old-fashioned hats of straw wrapped in muslin. Throughout the service everyone fanned themselves with wooden Egyptian-style corrugated fans decorated with advertisements from the local undertaker. The pastor, surrounded by his deacons and solemnly robed in puritan black and white, delivered a Bible-thumping sermon in which we were all threatened with hell fire and damnation if we did not mend our ways. After this, suitably chastened, we sang several choruses of "Washed in the Blood of the Lamb." The pastor then delivered a blessing and left the church, standing by the front door to greet his congregation.

As we rose to leave, I was quickly surrounded by the endlessly fluttering fans and by broad welcoming smiles: Who was I? Where did I come from? They were all very eager to know. But I had no sooner told them that I was staying at Koinonia Farm than the smiles turned to stone and the gestures of welcome were withdrawn. In seconds, the church had emptied, leaving me alone. Outside I

could hear murmuring and raised voices. Collecting my recording equipment, I slowly made my way past the empty pews and down the aisle to the door. Hot sunlight streamed through it as if from an open oven.

Outside waiting for me stood the deacons, not in their robes but in open-necked shirts with the sleeves rolled up: six large men each grasping a heavy axe handle. A shrill woman's voice from somewhere behind them cried out, "Go awn, Elmer, yew show im, yew show im!" One of the deacons moved close to me, his head a good deal higher than mine. He lifted his axe handle. The others moved in, their weapons also now coming up at the ready. Their leader's large face was blotchy and contorted. My knees shook. I was clearly about to be bashed to bloody pulp, an experience Judson had ill prepared me for. He snarled at me that I was a "nigger lover" and a "dirty Commie" and must now "take what's coming." I could see the pastor, sitting on the gate swinging his legs. In a moment's inspiration, I shouted to him. It saved my skin. Reluctantly he came over, his deacons making way. I was asked, ordered in fact, to come to his house. He talked for an hour as he explained to me why "niggers don't go to heaven" and therefore should be kept separate. I was then shown the door.

As I tottered toward my car, feeling rather as if I had been scalped, another vehicle swooped in from the road and squealed to a stop behind mine. It was the local sheriff. He walked toward me, fat, smooth-faced, and slow, gun at the ready. He had heard, he said, and I still cannot believe this, that I had arrived from a "Commie submarine off the coast," and unless I went back to where I belonged he would run me in. Not knowing how to argue with such misinformation, I was in no mood to take on the Georgian police force. I hastened back to Koinonia and then drove back to the comparative safety of Judson House.

Back at the house I told them my story. It was scarcely believed. Were things down there really as bad as all that? The Judson congregation seemed disappointed. Perhaps they had hoped for a martyr's death, or was it that their worst fears were confirmed?

The Indian princess wanted to console me. She was scornful of America. There was no racism in India, she told me. She then asked me if I would like to meet Pandit Nehru, who had arrived in New York on a visit to the United Nations. Of course I accepted, and

soon a little party of students and I were sitting cross-legged on a carpeted floor while the great man told us of India's problems. He was glad, he said, to see Indian students in New York but he pleaded with them to return to their homeland once their studies were finished. Later I asked him whether he thought they would take up the challenge. "No," he told me sadly, "once they have tasted of America, they can think of nothing else."

## THE EARLY 1960S—THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM

I found the Student House to be curiously unpolitical. Apart from our battle of what we considered "our" park, the students seemed apathetic. But then we learned that a presidential candidate was coming to town. The park was crowded. No one could tell us where the candidate, whoever it was, would speak. Surely not the fountain! Then, suddenly a tall figure moved onto the balcony of the new university union building right next to the house. It took us only a few moments to realize it was John Kennedy. Taller and younger than the politicians we were used to, with a face that was splendidly tanned, he looked immensely healthy and rich. His Boston accent echoed over the hundreds of people below him, many of whom were hanging on every word. Most of the women students clutched each other in ecstasy, and even the men looked unusually respectful. Was the New Age he promised right around the corner? It seemed that way.

So it had long seemed at Judson. Sitting on the balcony at Judson Church or in the gymnasium watching local boys being taught how to box, visiting with local artists intent on a new art form called "Happenings," I would talk with other Judsonites as well as students. Whatever the reason behind Judson's Student House, it was clearly in the midst of a growing American maelstrom. Living there was unsettling. The place had no rules, no preconceived expectations, or it seemed to have none. It was a sanctuary for explorers coming in out of the cold. But unknown to us, its tiny rooms were incubators from which the new youth of America would soon erupt. It was the quiet time before the storm.

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In 1990, **BERNARD MAYES**

abandoned Christianity. He is currently an academic dean in the University of Virginia and Fellow of Brown College.