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ESSAY

The Disorder of Life: James Baldwin on My Shoulder, Part Two

Karen Thorsen

Abstract

Filmmaker Karen Thorsen gave us *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket*, the award-winning documentary that is now considered a classic. First broadcast on PBS/American Masters in August, 1989—just days after what would have been Baldwin's sixty-fifth birthday—the film premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 1990. It was not the film Thorsen intended to make. Beginning in 1986, Baldwin and Thorsen had been collaborating on a very different film project: a "nonfiction feature" about the history, research, and writing of Baldwin's next book, "Remember This House." It was also going to be a film about progress: about how far we had come, how far we still have to go, before we learn to trust our common humanity. But that project ended abruptly. On 1 December 1987, James Baldwin died—and "Remember This House," book *and* film died with him. Suddenly, Thorsen's mission changed: the world needed to know what they had lost. Her alliance with Baldwin took on new meaning. The following memoir—the second of two serialized parts—explores how and why their collaboration began. The first installment appeared in the sixth volume of *James Baldwin Review*, in the fall of 2020; the next stage of their journey starts here.

Keywords: James Baldwin, "Remember This House," *The Price of the Ticket*, filmmaking, Vietnam, Algeria, film, *cinéma vérité*

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James Baldwin and I met only once. It's still stunning to me how much my life changed with just one physical meeting. There were many other exchanges with him over the course of my lifetime, but only one meeting. My whole "Part I" essay in volume 6 of *James Baldwin Review* is about the lead-up to that single encounter, and my reasons for trying to find him.[1]

I had a film to propose: a Direct Cinema portrait that aimed to explore what the civil rights activist and best-selling author was up to "today." I was to produce it; Albert and David Maysles, the famous *vérité* filmmakers, would be the directors of record; and the new PBS series, *American Masters*, had agreed to help fund it … *if* we could land a commitment from Baldwin.

Back in 1985, he was still a transatlantic commuter. It was hard to figure out how to reach him, going through publishers and the various people who knew him, then actually figuring out where he was on the planet. And then, how to get his attention. But I knew he'd been teaching in Massachusetts—and when I finally found him, it was through his colleagues at UMass.

He was, understandably, beset and besieged by too many proposals like mine. His first instinct was to say "yes" to everyone—but that left many hanging, hoping their turn would come. As for those he *did* see, he almost always gave more of himself than anyone on the receiving end ever expected—which almost always took longer than planned. That's part of why he was so often late (forty minutes in my case … and that was better than most). But finally, we connected.

Our exchanges took place in stages, over the winter of 1985–86: first a letter, then faxes, then phone calls … then in April at The Ginger Man, his midday New York City restaurant of choice. It was an extraordinary, long, wet lunch; it was everything I could have hoped for: suddenly, my months of planning a film about him and his current concerns became real. Yes, I'd done my research—but as I look back now, I realize I was so naïve about the whole undertaking at that point. I had such a superficial understanding of who he really was, what he'd been through, about the weight of his message and the social forces at stake. And I'm still learning. Even after decades of exploring his journey, my understanding keeps evolving, his words keep inspiring new notes in my margins.

I now know that that was one of his gifts: he could make people feel like kindred spirits. I say this with all humility. Our lunch went well in part because of who I am, who I was then—but far more because of his own ability to embrace the stranger, racially, socially, intellectually, spiritually. He was by nature warm-hearted. Empathetic. And curious: he clearly liked to seed encounters with questions.

We touched on so many subjects. A lot of what I wrote in Part I of my *JBR* essay was drawn from that day, from the personal histories we shared over omelets, white wine, and his whiskey on refill. What we loved about France. What we saw in Jean Genet, Thomas Paine, a Vietnamese general. Adventures in Connecticut, Istanbul. Church. What his next book could be, and should be. What he hoped for his country, his students, for young people in general. And, most especially, filmmaking.

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What strikes me now is that even though it was race, civil rights, which had brought us together as potential collaborators, that wasn't our primary topic. We talked across differences, not about them. We dove into ideas, what shaped our impressions, what might be achieved. The possibility of making a film that explored life as we saw it. And we laughed. A lot.

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He was no stranger to film. He'd loved movies ever since he was a kid, he'd poured his heart into scripts that never made it to screen, he'd appeared on screen himself countless times—and, as I already knew from our prior exchanges, he was searching for something.

He had a project in mind, he called it "Remember This House"—or, as he sometimes wrote the title, "Re/Member This House"—that he envisioned as both a book and a film. It had been on and off his back burner since the late 1970s: it had almost become a *New Yorker* essay; it was a work-in-progress for which McGraw-Hill had paid a substantial advance; it had even been impetus for the 1982 documentary, *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*.[2] But it had yet to become what he believed it should be.

Like all his ideas, this one kept evolving. What he had first seen as a revisitation of civil rights in the sixties, a retracing of history and the three men who gave their lives to the movement—Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—now promised to be a more personal, more intimate memoir. This was still to be an assessment of then vs. now, a keen examination of progress and the lack thereof; but it would also be, he insisted, a far deeper exploration than his original vision: a first-person journey through friendship, family, and generational courage.

I could see in his face how much this project mattered.

As a necessary continuation of his own past work. As a tribute to his friends' lost lives. As salve for his still-open wounds.

As his own form of sorrow song: "so many of us, cut down, so soon."[3]

His eyes, those "big world-absorbing eyes" that had so deeply searched mine, looked aside, still in mourning, trying to fathom the pain.[4] For a moment, words failed him—and that, as he finally began to explain, was the problem with "Remember This House." Somewhere, in some un-nameable distance, he was sure there were answers; but it had become increasingly difficult to put thoughts on paper … especially when these three men were concerned. His expression turned vulnerable, almost pleading: he admitted that he'd already tossed several drafts—and that the phone discussions we had had were part of why he was meeting me now.

Maybe, just maybe, the mix of research and writing with filmmaking would help his narrative find its voice.

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The more we talked, the more it seemed possible.

He was wary, of course, of outside intervention. He'd had his share of filmmakers who had tried to define him, indulging their own vision instead of his. And he had already flirted with *cinéma vérité*—or Direct Cinema, as the Maysles Brothers chose to call it—and discovered the pitfalls. In retrospect, he confessed, he'd been disappointed by the *vérité* aspects of past filmmaking efforts he had been part of because the films that resulted felt random, diffuse. Conversations lacked substance; encounters felt forced… What good was *vérité* if life "as it happened" was boring? Or fake? To his credit, he didn't just blame the filmmakers: he blamed himself for believing that his presence on screen would be enough to sustain an audience.

What he wanted was structure, a narrative plan that was shaped by more than the quirks of his schedule. And depth. He quoted Vincent Canby's review of *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*—"Something seems to be missing"—and laughed at its vagueness: "so polite!"[5] Then he leaned in, suddenly serious. "What's really missing in that film is hope."[6]

He wasn't denying the frustration he felt, the anger, the fear that gripped the souls of Black folk on a near-daily basis. He wasn't negating the obvious truth, that progress hailed by the white world was more fiction than fact, that lives were still being crushed on what he called "Freedom Road." But he still believed that progress was possible, and he wanted people to know that.

He had faith in potential, in our innate need for love—and that had been his conviction for most of his life. I know this, but not just from his writings. I heard it then in his words, in the pained insistence that shaped them; I confirmed it later after his death, while combing through hundreds of hours of archival material during research for my own film, *The Price of the Ticket* (1990). This man was consistent: I could intercut the first half of a statement he made in his thirties with the end of a statement he made at age sixty without changing the message. Whether at the height of his fame or no longer admired, he never wavered. Love was the solution. And hope was essential.

Even so, the public reaction to *Grapevine* still rankled. He regretted its darkness—and he wanted "Remember This House" to reflect the light that he saw, both in his three friends and in "some" human beings. Why "some"? As he counseled his teenage nephew in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), "Destruction and death … is what most of mankind has been best at since we have heard of man. But remember: most of mankind is not *all* of mankind."[7]

Medgar, Malcolm, Martin… Their presence—their absence—consumed him. Each one of these men held a complex place in history, each one of them held a complex place in his heart. All three had struggled with the pull of public life, the constant demands of the cause; all three had welcomed him into their homes, their families. All three had had children, infants whom he had held, kids about whom he still cared, sons and daughters who were now in their twenties.

As he stated on British television, just months after our lunch, "You can't tell the children there's no hope."[8]

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This project was far more complex than I'd dared to imagine.

It was to be both a book and a film. It was to examine three famous men who'd been killed—*assassinated*—through the lens of a man who loved them. It was to be about the civil rights movement on a very personal level, about a search for the past and what that means to the present. It was still to be about progress—but on a national, global, even spiritual level, in terms of the human soul. He knew it would be painful, that this kind of probing would come at great cost to himself; he knew that was why it was so damn hard to write. But he was determined.

He quizzed me intently on process, on how the Maysles Brothers and I might approach this shared journey. I had already sent him a brief proposal; it described Direct Cinema, the brothers' impressive history and how the three of us hoped to follow him with our camera and sound gear, gradually crafting a nuanced portrait. For fundraising purposes, we'd called our project "James Baldwin Today," but that was way too generic for this conversation.

Based on what he'd told me thus far, I dove in. While the remains of my omelet got cold, I suggested that a film version of "Remember This House" might resemble his approach to the Atlanta child murders: a search without foregone conclusions; a search, not for gruesome facts, but for larger ideas found in intimate details. He had just published *The Evidence of Things Not Seen* about brutal killings in the city "too busy to hate," first as an essay in *Playboy* that won the magazine's 1981 Best Nonfiction Award, then as a 1985 book that received tepid reviews.[9] "Far too much sermonizing," said the *New York Times*—a comment he shrugged off as predictable.[10] He warned me against reading reviews—"They can kill your initiative"—but I could tell he was pleased that I was paying attention. He waved for a refill. "The truth is hard to take, but that's what I'm searching for. Or as some call it, *vérité*." He smiled, but we both knew he had issued a challenge. He wanted to hear what "our" word meant to us.

I took a deep breath: *this* was why we were having lunch.

I described our approach as a form of faith in humanity, a decision to explore a particular individual, a conviction that there was a story worth telling. A way of using real-life interactions to reveal central truth. I explained how we always began with a framework, an initial focus which would tell us where to start filming: in his case, it was likely to be a mix of research in the South, teaching in the North, and time spent with the families he wanted to write about. We would travel together, and then, as our journey evolved, the four of us would decide what to film next. Other than the presence of film crews, our only intervention in the "truth" that we captured would be in the edit room, where the real storytelling takes shape—and where he would be welcome to participate in our progress.

He nodded. "But what about the children?" he asked. "What role would they play?" I wasn't prepared for that question.

As we debated the possibilities, the themes he hoped to address and various narrative arcs that might be able to carry his themes, two ideas took hold: "Remember This House" would be his message to the next generation—and three young people would help him shape it. The eldest son of Martin Luther King, Jr., the

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eldest daughter of Malcolm X, and the youngest son of Medgar Evers would be his through-line.

He had watched all three of them lose their fathers.

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Jimmy loved children, he always had—far beyond the fact that they represented the future. (I forgot to mention: somewhere in the course of our life-changing lunch, he insisted that I call him Jimmy.) First of all, he had raised his own siblings, almost as a parent. As the eldest of nine, he knew what it was to hold a book in one hand and bounce kids on his knee with the other. Second, as a gay man, he didn't have his own children, but he cared deeply about his nieces and nephews. And third—a surprise that arrived later in life, once he began teaching—he loved his students. Not only did they offer hope, but they also "kept him honest." He cared enormously about what they thought. In many regards, he felt as if they were teaching him.

He was currently a professor at the University of Massachusetts, shuttling between classes at five different colleges. He was notoriously erratic; he'd zoom in, late for class, or miss classes entirely because he was traveling—then make up for it later both on and off campus, during afternoon office hours and, even better, after hours, when he'd take groups of students out for drinks or to his home in Pelham for late-night discussions. This was not run-of-the-mill teaching; it was how he interacted with most human beings. Students adored him.

And he revered them. It was their honesty, their curiosity, their eagerness to learn and evolve that got him. Their unfiltered innocence.

He told me how on his very first day of teaching as a Writer-in-Residence at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, in the fall of 1979, a white student had asked him point-blank "Why does the white boy hate the nigger?" He laughed, eyes widened, reliving the moment: the class was racially mixed, there was no way he'd expected to dive in that deep on day one, but he had little choice—and his students ran with it.

"I underestimated those children."

He knew what they would have to face once they were out in the world, that they would soon be "forced to be strangers"—but not yet, not now.[11] The rest of that first class—and the entire semester—flew by in candid discussion, each one taking gradual measure of the "other" lives in the room and the baggage they carried.

He wrote about that experience, about those "innocent" students, a year later in *Esquire*: "They were trying to become whole. They were trying to put themselves and their country together."[12] A lofty goal. It was what he'd been trying to do for most of his life; it was what he wanted to do with "Remember This House."

And it began with a question.

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Questions were a constant in James Baldwin's life. They were central to his search for identity, to his role as a writer, a teacher, to his frustration with the pace of "progress." For him, asking questions, tough questions, was a given: it came with the territory of being human.

He wrote about this repeatedly, underscoring our need for self-discovery—which, he believed, would lead to a better understanding of others. His experience in Ohio had confirmed this. At first, I laughed with him as he described that first class, feeling the shock that he'd felt, dismissing his student's question as clueless. But then I realized—I wasn't so different from that kid, just more polite. My own copies of his books were proof: pages full of underlined questions—later starred multiple times in various colored inks—that showed how uncertain I was.

I, too, was searching for answers. And his questions helped:

> "Isn't love more important than color?"[13]
> "What, under heaven … could cause any people to act as white people acted?"[14]
> "Who is it for and who is paying for it? And why isn't it for you?"[15]
> "If you think I'm a nigger, it means you need it. Why?"[16]
> "What, exactly, is the 'good' of society?"[17]

These were questions he lived with, questions he had spent a lifetime trying to answer—questions that we all, as Americans, need to ask ourselves. Not just need to ask, but *must* ask, he insisted: "the future of the country depends on that."[18]

So why do people, white people, find Baldwin's questions so hard to tackle? He blames fear: fear of guilt, fear of pain, fear of difference. Fear of losing the identity that we're convinced we deserve. According to him, we've been stuck in a trap of our own making: "the sunlit prison of the American dream," "the place where questions are not asked."[19] Instead of curiosity, empathy, we've chosen indifference. Instead of questioning and evolving, we've chosen denial. Willful ignorance: anything to help us feel safe and keep illusion intact.

No wonder we feel so divided.

"Alienation from oneself and one's people is, in sum, the American experience."[20]

I told Jimmy I'd encountered that statement at Vassar, when I was the same age as his students at Bowling Green. It was in my assigned reading, in *Notes of a Native Son*, the essay titled "Encounter on the Seine." It's near the end of the book, but of course I read that one first: I was just back from Paris, a junior year abroad that, like Baldwin's questions, rocked my perspective.

Alienated? I felt more than alienated. I felt ashamed. And driven.

"Why?" His eyes were so focused, I almost felt swallowed. "Why did you feel that way?"

I looked across at him, hesitant—who was I to explain alienation to *him*—but he reassured me.

"That's why I love teaching: I get to connect with the next generation."

Once again, I dove in. I confessed that I'd felt out-of-place, stuck in a system I didn't agree with, even before I read *Notes.* I was part of the counter-culture, one

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of those flower children whom Baldwin called "idealistic, fragmented … impotent."[21] I'd felt that way as a student in Paris, when I tried to pretend I was Danish, just to avoid constant reminders of my nation's exploitation of others. I'd felt that way later, post-graduation, once I'd become a journalist: just as he had squirmed as a young book reviewer, expected to write about one subject only—"all those post-war 'Be kind to colored people,' 'Be kind to Jews' books," as he put it—I was Time Inc.'s token hippie, expected to satisfy what they called the "youth market."[22]

On top of that, I was female.

Most white men don't know how it feels to be less than. Even my own father, who went out of his way to emphasize my ability, my equality, didn't know how many times I felt obliged to dumb down, just to fit in. How many times I had to fight off self-doubt, wondering whether an achievement was due to talent … or looks. How many men I had to handle with care, deflecting advances without exploding their ego. Yes, I was privileged, by my whiteness and all that came with it; the battles I fought were minor compared to those fought by women of color. But even so, I felt diminished, devalued.

Was it simply that I wasn't as good as Jane Howard—the *LIFE* magazine reporter who, way back in May 1963, had written so articulately about Baldwin—or the few other female reporters whom Time Inc. had deemed worthy of bylines?[23] I teetered between self-doubt and determination.

I had to fight for the right to write about "adult" topics, male topics, like crime and war. And when I did crack that door open, I had to fight for the right to express my "female" perspective: one that tended toward a more empathetic, more personal take. I'm still proud of the few times I broke through, pieces on living in fear and anti-war protests that became *LIFE* cover stories—but I'm also well aware that those minor triumphs could never have happened without the help of two men: my superior Richard Stolley and his boss Philip Kunhardt, two exceptional editors who heard my frustration and let me try.[24]

A lot like my filmmaking mentor, Albert Maysles, a full decade later. He not only let me try, he made my Jimmy film *possible*.

That said, I never once wanted to be male—any more than Baldwin wanted to be white. Who could possibly want, as he so pointedly asked in *The Fire Next Time*, "to be integrated into a burning house?"[25] I simply wanted, like him, to enjoy equal opportunity, recognition. The right to define myself.

"Not *what* I was, but *who*."[26]

That phrase came straight out of *Notes*. It felt weird, quoting Baldwin to Baldwin, but I couldn't resist.

Jimmy smiled. "I'm still trying to answer that question myself."

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My struggles as a twenty-something beginner led to publishing memories of his own. I had already read the preface he wrote for the 1984 re-release of *Notes of a Native Son,* so I knew part of the story: that his close friend from high school, Sol Stein—who by the mid-1950s had become an editor at Beacon Press—had

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suggested that Jimmy publish a collection of essays, and that Jimmy resisted. At age 29, he declared, he was "too young to publish" his "memoirs."[27] I also knew that despite those misgivings, he'd finally agreed to author *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) because he was broke, and that he'd written its titular essay—widely regarded as one of his best—in a rush, desperate to earn a fee from *Harper's* magazine before Beacon Press published the book.

What I didn't know until we traded tales over lunch was how much energy he'd put into revising those early essays, not just rewriting but reinstating passages that had been cut by his editors. Most egregious was *Harper's*: to avoid alienating white "liberal" readers, they had changed the essay's title from "Notes of a Native Son"—dropping his reference to Richard Wright's inflammatory protest novel, *Native Son* (1940)—to the less confrontational "Me and My House," a biblical phrase which had been one of his original titles.[28] And, even worse, they had cut the description of his stepfather's funeral service, the eulogy that evoked American racism, reminding him not to judge the departed too harshly: "the man who had gone down under an impossible burden."[29]

"What? Not the section with that line about preparing the child?"

I was shocked. That passage contained one of the questions I'd underlined: "How to prepare the child for the day when the child would be despised?"[30] Not only was this quintessential Baldwin, it was also an impossible question to answer … and close to unbearable. I guess that's why they cut it.

Jimmy helped me connect the dots.

In the fall of 1953, *Harper's* had already published one of his essays, "Stranger in the Village," about his time in a Swiss village whose inhabitants had never seen a Negro. They had featured the article on their cover, with the contents intact; after all, that piece was less threatening, it looked at race from a distance. But then the South began to reach critical mass. In May 1954, the US Supreme Court overruled the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* "separate but equal" decision, stating in *Brown v. Board of Education* that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional—and that was just the beginning. In May 1955, the Court issued a second decree, further enforcing school integration. In August 1955, 14-year-old Emmett Till was brutally murdered, lynched in Mississippi after "disrespecting" a white shopkeeper's wife. In September 1955, once Till's mutilated body was found, his mother chose to have an open-casket funeral "so the world could see." America was on edge. As was the young Baldwin: he had been pouring his energy into two uphill efforts, both unlikely to see publication—*The Amen Corner* (1968), a play that pitted church against family, and *Giovanni's Room* (1956), a novel that explored homosexual love—and he needed money.

"So I let it happen."

Harper's published "Me and My House" on 1 November 1955. His editors had also cut other, less significant segments, supposedly in the interest of "adjusting for page length"—but as Jimmy recalled it, what bothered him most was that they had excised specific emotional triggers, his more speculative passages about "bitterness." "Rage." "Another me trapped in my skull."[31] They'd even cut one of the

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lines that has since become so well known: “Hatred, which could destroy so much, never failed to destroy the man who hated.”[32]

We stared at each other, contemplating the loss.

“It feels like a violation. Not as overt as others I’ve suffered, but still … It stings.” He told me how outraged he’d been at age 12, when a Pentecostal church bulletin censored his first work in print. “By the time I found out, it was too late to object.”

At least he was able to publish the full text of his essay in the book version of *Notes*—and though the book didn’t sell well initially, his fee from *Harper’s* plus the advance from Beacon was enough for him to return to France.

And the dots kept connecting.

“That summer with Emmett Till: I didn’t know it back then, but that’s when ‘Remember This House’ really took on a mind of its own.”

The way Jimmy saw it now, he had been sidling up to this exploration of Southern roots—“his inescapable identity”—for most of his life.[33] Beyond all the “books and headlines and music” that sang of the South there was this unspoken sense of *community* that stretched all the way North to his childhood in Harlem: love and religion and warmth mixed with bloodshed and unspeakable suffering.[34] Plus the conundrum of history: the unavoidable fact that his “ancestors were both white and black,” that he was “bone of their bone, flesh of their flesh.”[35]

The American South is part of Baldwin’s DNA. It runs through his writing in a torrent of conflicting emotions—fictionalized, dramatized, interpreted, eulogized—but it wasn’t until 1957, haunted by Emmett Till, by the traumas of desegregation, that he actually went there. Then again. And again. It was during his first trip that he met Martin Luther King, Jr.; it was during his 1963 lecture tour, the one covered by Jane Howard for *LIFE* magazine, that he met Medgar Evers. His exploration of “what Negroes sometimes call the Old Country”—the deeply personal dive that began with *Go Tell It*, with “Notes of a Native Son” (aka “Me and My House”) and so much of his writing since then—was once again demanding attention in “Remember This House.”[36]

I asked him whether the “House” in both titles were one and the same.

He nodded, almost rueful. “When I left for Paris, I thought I was running away—but I’ve been running toward this all of my life.”

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Jimmy leveled his gaze.

“Know whence you came.”[37] Now it was his turn to quote himself, this one from *The Fire Next Time*. “That advice wasn’t just for my nephew, it’s for all of us. Including me. Even when it’s painful.”

Know whence you came. Or, as he once told Studs Terkel in a radio interview, “If you don’t know what happened behind you, you’ve got no idea of what is happening around you.”[38] For Baldwin, this had become another “immutable law”: in order to shape the future, we have to understand the history behind us.[39]

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"History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We *are* our history."[40]

But that doesn't mean we have to perpetuate it.

My history suggested that after dabbling with a career, I was expected to marry, have kids, be a patriotic American. Baldwin's history alleged that expectations were useless, that he would be lucky if he survived at all.

His solution: examine lies; explore truth; expand potential.

He expressed this more fully in the introduction to his 1961 collection of essays, *Nobody Knows My Name*:

> It would seem, unless one looks more deeply at the phenomenon, that most people are able to delude themselves and get through their lives quite happily. But I still believe that the unexamined life is not worth living; and I know that self-delusion, in the service of no matter what lofty cause, is a price no writer can afford. His subject is himself and the world and it requires every ounce of stamina he can summon to attempt to look on himself and the world as they are.[41]

I first read that when I was still in my twenties. Baldwin was born over two decades before me, but when he wrote about his world it felt as if he were speaking directly to mine. Not just because I had left home in search of myself, not just because I was questioning thoughts that once felt like givens, but because I saw more wrong than right with my country. As if endless assassinations weren't enough, the Nixon years were living proof that the majority of my voting-age countrymen were deluded. I was a child of the sixties and seventies, I had written about Vietnam as a journalist, I had driven down to DC to protest the war, I had linked arms with my Viet-vet friend when he threw his Purple Heart at the Capitol—and when I read Baldwin's critiques of French Indochina and colonial exploitation "for the good of the natives" in *No Name in the Street*, it was 1974 and I had just returned from Saigon myself.[42]

The dangers of self-delusion became an important part of our Ginger Man ramblings. When I told him that based on his writings, my determination to live a more closely "examined life" had led to a month in Vietnam, he laughed—but in true Jimmy form, he wanted more.

"Was this before or after the peace agreement?"

"After."

We both knew what that meant.

In May 1973, after quitting my job in Paris as a foreign correspondent for *Time* (the assignment I'd taken on when *LIFE* ceased publication), I hitchhiked to Cannes, planning to cover the Festival as a freelancer—but then I met a French team prepping a film shoot in Asia, and they asked me to join them. We spent the rest of the year filming in Sri Lanka, India, and, on a second trip, Bali; when we finally wrapped, they flew back to France while I headed East. By the time I arrived in Vietnam, it was early 1974—warm on the coast with snow in the highlands—and the war was ostensibly over. The Paris Peace Accords had been signed, most

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US troops had withdrawn, Congress had cut promised funding… The struggle, at least on the surface, was now exclusively Vietnamese, North v. South: in retrospect, an illusion with a predictable ending. For many Americans, it felt almost like victory, they couldn't wait to forget—but for me, it was unfinished business.

As Jimmy said about his need to leave Paris and join the civil rights struggle in person back in the late 1950s, "I simply had to go."

I had history to deal with. I went because I had so many questions, because I'd been so bombarded by government disinformation that I wanted to see for myself—and because so many had died there. As an American, I felt I owed them … something.

Acknowledgment. An apology. And selfishly, absolution: I wanted to let the Vietnamese people know that I was *not*, as Jimmy wrote about his own fractured identity, "to be confused with the Marshall Plan, Hollywood, the Yankee dollar, television, or Senator McCarthy"—or, for that matter, with the Tonkin Gulf Resolution, the My Lai massacre, Agent Orange, or Kent State.[43]

All those things had been done by Americans for "the 'good' of society" … or so they tried to tell us.[44] Self-delusion? The irony hung between us: here we were, two Americans, enjoying the comforts of capitalism while exploring past shame.

*****

When I told Jimmy about General Thi, he was fascinated—as I hoped he would be.

General Lam Quang Thi—whose surname was Lam, but whom I soon came to call Thi, or, more respectfully, General Thi—was Commander in Chief, Forward Command for ARVN, the US-supported Army of the Republic of Vietnam. I first met the general because of photographer Larry Burrows. Back in 1971 when I was still with *LIFE*, Burrows had died on assignment, his helicopter shot down over Laos; I steeped myself in his photos, eight years of exquisitely framed wartime pain and compassion. Two of them left me in tears: one, a wounded Black soldier, reaching out to his wounded white comrade; the other, a young Vietnamese woman, grieving over the body bag holding her husband. Both of those images came from the DMZ, the no-man's land between North and South Vietnam. They summed up why I was so fervently anti-war … and why, once I'd explored Saigon, I felt compelled to fly north.

On the plane up to Hue, fate sat me next to a young South Vietnamese government official. The fact that I was a former foreign correspondent for *Time*, now freelance, led to a meeting with General Thi—in a room thick with white male "advisors," heads bent over maps. This was the era of post-Peace Accord Vietnamization, when Americans no longer wore uniforms but still called the shots. They looked at me askance. My take? I think the general brought me there as a form of defiance: an offense small enough for the suits to tolerate.

The encounter expanded from there. Beyond my Time Inc. credentials, the fact that I was fluent in French, that I had studied French culture, created a special bond. We spoke more French than English; he asked me to call him Thi. "*Ça me*

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rappelle mes années d'étudiant à Paris," he told me. "This brings back my years as a student in Paris."[45] When I told him I had a room in a local hotel, more affordable than respectable, he invited me to be his houseguest; his family was down south in Saigon, he had plenty of room. "*Je vous donnerai de quoi écrire*," he assured me. "I will give you something to write about."

I was too intrigued to say no.

After a tour of Hue's war-damaged Citadel, the eighteenth-century Imperial City where Nguyen Lords once ruled a unified Vietnam, we turned into a cobblestone courtyard next an impressive villa, more Western than Asian, with a view of the Perfume River. I had a suite of my own; dinners were formal, served by uniformed staff; the cuisine was international, and superb. (The general was a foodie.) I was his pampered guest for five days: organized excursions each morning, most of them in his personal helicopter; free time in Hue each afternoon.

Day #1: A scenic trip up and down river via Swift Boat—basically, a souped-up water taxi with gun turrets—while the general explained regional history and pointed out landmarks. We visited floating markets; we pulled up beside sampans to buy local treats. It was hard to believe this was a country at war.

Day #2: A return to Hue's airport, Phu Bai, the region's support base for armed South Vietnamese forces—which, I was astounded to learn, had just reopened after being damaged in combat. It was a contest for the hills, ARVN v. PAVN, still ongoing: whoever held the crests decimated the opposition below.[46] We visited the hospital at one end of the runway; wounded soldiers were airlifted in while we watched.

Day #3: A trip north to the notorious 17th parallel, the "temporary" DMZ established by the 1954 Geneva Accords, extending three miles on each side of the border. We spent most of our time underground, exploring tunnels recently captured and "cleansed" by the general's army. Carved out of limestone by the Viet Cong, they were part shelter, part supply route, part booby trap: pits lined with sharp punji sticks were still a hazard.

Day #4: A trip west, toward Laos: we landed in a valley near a bombed-out building, a two-story schoolhouse with a huge hole in the center and walls still intact. Stairs led to what was left of the second floor, where American soldiers had taken refuge, trying to fend off attackers. The white walls were covered with messages scrawled in English: last words of love addressed to girlfriends, wives, mothers. "101st Airborne," the general told me. "*C'étaient des héros*." "They were heroes."

Day #5: It began with *Taekwan-Do*. When I came down for breakfast, Thi was in full regalia, the sole Vietnamese general with a black belt in martial arts. While I sat on his front staircase, not sure what to expect, aides placed wooden planks on two pedestals; he broke them, one after another, each one increasing in size, with his bare hand. Over croissants and coffee, he explained the science … and then ushered me to his chopper for our final excursion.

We flew south until we reached a clearing, an elegantly tiled terrace surrounded by weather-worn statues and a moss-covered temple: partially hidden by vines, this once majestic tomb of Emperor Gia Long had fought off the jungle for over

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150 years.[47] It was Gia Long who had unified Việt Nam after centuries of feudal warfare, moved its capital from Hanoi to Hue, begun building the Citadel as a tribute to Confucian wisdom. Under the gaze of stone warriors, we picnicked on the shrine steps—another sumptuous feast—while Thi linked the Emperor's many achievements to a 22-year alliance with a French Jesuit priest. "In return for help from the French," he explained, "Gia Long allowed the Church to expand in Southeast Asia." For Thi, this justified his own jumbled embrace of Confucian tradition, French culture, Catholic faith, and democratic ideals.

It was this history that captured Jimmy's attention. Spanning nations and centuries, it was a world view of oppressed and oppressors, a mix of conflicting selfhoods condensed into Thi's personal search for meaning. Identity. Like so many people of color, Thi had been educated by and for his oppressor—"*Nous, les Gaulois*," he had been taught to say, "We, the Gauls"—but as he learned far too late, when empires crumble, when power is threatened, maps are redrawn without thought for the people.

"It is power, not justice, which keeps rearranging the map."[48]

Baldwin wrote that sentence in *No Name in the Street* because he had lived it himself. In 1948, he left the US for Paris in order to save his own life; in 1954, he was in Paris when the French lost Indochina; in the late 1950s, early 1960s, he was there when the French lost Algeria; from the late 1950s on, he witnessed similar struggles for freedom in the American South. He saw what those conflicts cost, not just in lives but in minds and in hearts—and he understood the contradictions embodied by General Thi. Economic, religious, social, cultural. Personal.

Near the end of our picnic, Thi stood up, straightened his uniform. "You know the French poet, Lamartine?" He moved to the step just above me, cleared his throat:

Que me fait le coteau, le toit, la vigne aride ?
Que me ferait le ciel, si le ciel était vide ?
Je ne vois en ces lieux que ceux qui n'y sont pas !
Pourquoi ramènes-tu mes regrets sur leur trace ?
Des bonheurs disparus se rappeler la place,
C'est rouvrir des cercueils pour revoir des trépas ![49]

Alphonse de Lamartine was a nineteenth-century poet and statesman, an idealistic Romantic; he and the general had a lot in common. Both were men of provincial nobility who dedicated their lives to a republican cause—and both saw their republics defeated.

What does this vineyard mean to me, the roof, the dry vine?
What would heaven mean to me if heaven were empty?
I see in these places only those who are not here!
Why do you bring my regrets back to where they began?
To remember the place of vanished happiness
is to reopen coffins in order to see the remains.[50]

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As I listened to Thi's recitation, I heard his lament—not just for the Emperor buried nearby, not just for the republic about to be lost, but for the person he wasn't, the potential denied. Later that day, he escorted me to the airport, back again to Phu Bai where the wounded were still arriving on stretchers. When I boarded my plane, waving a final goodbye, he saluted.

I cried.

*****

"Your General Thi is my Madame Faure." Jimmy's voice was suddenly tender. "The past was taken from both of them. And their present. And future."

"Madame Faure?"

"She's my … She's my Algerian friend, my French—She sold me my house in Saint-Paul."

He knew: the cry of pain that I'd witnessed on the steps of that temple wasn't just for a conflicted Vietnamese general. It was for the uprooted, for all oppressed people, for the "many thousands gone" and for all those still fighting.[51]

"She was as violated by her past as he was by his." The lines in his face deepened. "That's what most people don't realize: the oppressor winds up as wounded as the oppressed. Maybe more so."

Why don't people get this? The answer tracks back to "self-delusion" and Baldwin's 1961 intro to *Nobody Knows My Name*.[52]

One of the roadblocks to self-awareness, to understanding identity, is that an oppressor rarely sees himself as unjust—and these two were no exception. Jeanne Faure was Jimmy's friend, yes, but she was also, like Thi, on the wrong side of war (if that oxymoron is even possible). Both she and Thi had been born far from France and yet they both were "*la vieille France*" incarnate: both had been raised "by and for France" to support a colonial empire that was "visibly and swiftly crumbling"; both had been "stripped of their birthrights" by rebels willing to die, and kill, for what they hoped would be freedom. And both she and Thi were loath to let go of the indoctrination that formed them.[53]

As Jimmy states on the last page of *No Name in the Street*, words he told me he'd written "down in my *donjon*," his dungeon, the ground floor of the home that he shared with Jeanne Faure, "It is terrible to watch people cling to their captivity."[54]

Mlle. Faure—or *Madame* as Jimmy sometimes called her, a form of respect that replaced *Mademoiselle*, the appropriate title for an unmarried French female—was his landlady in Saint-Paul de Vence. A proper, high-cheekboned woman with firmly stated convictions, she was known to less respectful neighbors as a *pied-noir*, a French citizen who was Algerian-born and whose feet had been blackened by time on African soil. For the first sixty-seven years of her life, she had lived in Oran, an ancient port on the north coast of Africa that had been an outpost of the Ottoman empire for well over a century—until 1830, when attacks by French warships plus years of targeted genocide turned the region into a resource-rich colony: *l'Algérie française.*

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The Faure family had been there for generations. Jeanne was proud to be a Faure, it was a familiar name in French history: her distant relatives back on the mainland had been noblemen, ministers, even president (President Félix Faure was known for his refusal to pardon the falsely accused Dreyfus, and for having died while in mid-intercourse with his mistress). And she was proud of her Algerian birthplace, a city washed by sun, wind, and sea where members of the Faure clan had helped rebuild the harbor and she had played on the beach as a child. Yes, there was violence, Muslim Arabs and Berbers had been trying to oust their oppressors for years; and yes, ever since 1 November 1954, when the bloody All Saints Day attacks took the world by surprise, the colony was officially at war. But even so, Jeanne and most of the people she knew never expected real change. In the 1960 census, her French-ruled home boasted over one million non-Muslim civilians, most of them European, most of them Catholic—and most of them longtime residents of Oran. They tried to lead normal lives … until 1962, when President Charles de Gaulle signed a ceasefire with the Algerian FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*), promising independence from France, and some irate citizens refused to yield. Shots were fired; a mob massacred thousands of colonial loyalists. In less than three months, Oran lost half its population—and with little more than a suitcase, Jeanne and her brother, Louis, fled their native land.

It was Dien Bien Phu all over again.

The two Faure siblings were outcasts, both in their sixties and forced to start over. As Jeanne later told Jimmy, and he told me, they chose Saint-Paul de Vence in part because relatives lived in the region, in part because of its limestone, the rocky crags high above the Mediterranean that reminded them of the hills overlooking Oran. Using the last of their cash from the *Banque d'Algérie*, they turned an eighteenth-century farm just outside of Saint-Paul into a much-needed source of income: keeping one wing for themselves, they rented the rest out to boarders and raised produce for city markets down on the coast. By the time Jimmy met them, they were living two lives. *Français repatriés*, repatriated French citizens, standing tall as if they had always belonged on the mainland—and *Algériens aliénés*, alienated Algerians, resented because of lives lost in war, ostracized because of "black-feet" roots … mourning a life that no longer existed.

A lot like General Lam Quang Thi: another identity fractured. Split between France and Asia, driven from Vietnam when Saigon fell, my fallen war hero faced the fate of most displaced people. His past was erased, his life irrevocably changed. This was true for Jimmy's ancestors; it was true for the Faures. As for Thi, he finally found haven in Fremont, California—forced to start over in a land that cared little for him or his history.

*****

"And they wonder why so many feel broken."

Jimmy stared into his drink. He too had been split: between Black and white, between oppressed and oppressor, between those who accused him of abandoning

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his own people and those who praised him for embracing theirs. Our silence weighed heavy; I worried. Had I derailed our discussions? Who was I to compare my problems to his, why had I felt so free to fill his time with my own self-indulgence… Maybe I had misread him.

He looked up.

"You know what gives me hope? The fact that those two refused to give up. The fact that we're sitting here feeling bad for them, even though they're our polar opposites." I exhaled; he laughed. "Did your general know you were an anti-war protester?"

I hesitated. "We never really—" I must have looked worried, because he jumped back in.

"That's my point. I've been consorting with the enemy for most of my life, it goes way back to sixth grade and my teacher, Bill Miller: she taught me how much we all have in common."

What a rebound. I suddenly flashed on an observation that Jimmy made back in the 1960s, a quote about our common humanity that I still turn to for sustenance. (I've already cited it in Part I of this essay—and included it in my film *The Price of the Ticket*, as a voiceover recorded by Baldwin.)[55] It's the quote that first appeared in Jane Howard's profile of the world-famous author, the one she wrote for *LIFE* magazine where she intercut her impressions with a long monologue of his own:

> You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was Dostoyevsky and Dickens who taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, or who ever had been alive.[56]

Those were the authors he'd read with his beloved Bill Miller. The discussions they'd had, the adventures they'd shared, were still with him. It had been years since he'd seen Bill, years since I'd looked at that magazine profile, but I could still see its headline—pure essence-of-Baldwin in eighteen-point type:

"The doom and glory of knowing who you are."

I asked him if he remembered that phrase.

"I do now." He paused, revisiting his own words, weighing their meaning. "*That's* what I want to achieve with 'Remember This House': helping those three kids—and the world—understand who they are."

I was impressed. We'd just spent two hours ranging all over the map, but he never lost focus—and now here we sat, right back on topic. Examine your life. Know whence you came. Understand where you are. Figure out what needs to be changed and face it. Only then, only when you've set out to do that, can you say yes to love and explore your connections to others.

That's the message I was receiving, that's the message I believe Jimmy hoped to deliver. Our film was beginning to take shape in my mind: one third *vérité* footage

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of Baldwin, down South with the families and up North in his classrooms; one third first-person truth-telling, with Baldwin and his "witnesses" speaking straight to the camera; one third archival history, images drawn from Baldwin's past to illuminate present and future. A three-legged stool where no single segment would stand without support from the others—and where all three would be intercut with each other.

He agreed.

"But the main point of all this is the kids."

Jimmy called them kids, but they were actually young adults: at the time of our lunch, Medgar Evers's son James, aka "Van," was 25; Malcolm X's daughter Attallah Shabazz was 26; Martin Luther King, Jr.'s son Martin III was 27. There were other brothers and sisters, but these were the ones he knew best.

"They're just the right age: no longer naïve, not yet cynical. Still unbridled." He grinned, enthusiasm building. "Remember, I left the country at age 24; I would've had plenty to say if someone had asked me. And besides, these kids know me. They'll trust me."

For Jimmy, these three young adults—and their fathers—epitomized "doom and glory."[57] He'd been searching for a way into the memoir he was trying to write; he'd scrapped draft after draft, unable to solve it. I sat there, humbled, as his thoughts kept evolving. But this felt like the key: making a film while he wrote would help him structure his story; this wounded trio, their pain, their fate, the way they chose to deal with the conflicts they faced, the hope they held for our future would be the fulcrum on which his story would pivot. Their fathers were activists who made history happen. They were recipients of both progress and loss. Like his nieces and nephews, like his students, they had a perspective that was beyond his reach: they could teach him and, even better, reach the next generation. Whatever it was they were thinking. That was the exciting part, he had no way of knowing how they might respond. He just had to figure out which questions to ask.

Once again, there it was: the importance of questions. Back and forth we went, suggesting ideas, debating reactions, trying to imagine the conversation he wanted to have. And then one possibility gave us both chills.

"Was it worth it that your father was assassinated?"

I repeat:

"Was it worth it that your father was assassinated?"

We stared at each other. Was this too strong for an opener? Too insensitive, given their personal history? Jimmy was silent a moment, then shook his head, no.

"I know these kids, they can take it. They're smart, they're tough—They've faced far worse. And you know what?" His face softened. "I think they need this."

We had our first question.

If those young souls could face this—if we *all* were able to face it, unpack it, explore what it might mean if their lives were our lives—"Remember This House" might make a difference.

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As Baldwin wrote in a 1962 essay, a phrase that was to guide us in the journey ahead, “Not everything that is faced can be changed. But nothing can be changed until it is faced.”[58]

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Contributor’s Biography

Karen Thorsen is an award-winning writer/filmmaker who finds inspiration at the intersection of art and social justice. Her heroes are game-changers, the artist/activists who shape history; her films tell stories without narration, weaving first-person narratives with archival treasures. Thorsen began as a writer. After graduating from Vassar with a year at the Sorbonne, she was an editor for Simon

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and Schuster, journalist for *LIFE* and foreign correspondent for *Time*. Screenwriting followed, then directing. Her first feature-length documentary was *James Baldwin: The Price of the Ticket* (1990), produced with Maysles Films and PBS/ American Masters. Now considered a classic, it has been honored in twenty-five countries. Recently remastered in WideScreen 2KHD, the new 'Digital Baldwin' is a centerpiece of the James Baldwin Project's nationwide series of community forums on racism, discrimination, and the meaning of brotherhood. Supported by the Ford Foundation, NEA, and others, these film screenings and "talkbacks" have already reached tens of thousands. Beyond Baldwin, Thorsen's credits include broadcast productions, museum installations, documentary shorts, and interactive media—often in collaboration with DKDmedia's Douglas K. Dempsey. Their films have screened on six continents and in six museums on the National Mall; permanent installations include the Smithsonian Museum of American History, George Washington's Mount Vernon, Great Platte River Archway, and Pilgrim Hall Museum. Recognition ranges from multiple THEA and festival honors to Parents Choice and the Oscars short list. Thorsen's current projects include *The Disorder of Life: James Baldwin on My Shoulder* in book form (a continuation of the two essays published by *JBR*); *Keep It Lit!*, a digital design-your-own James Baldwin curriculum (with the National Writing Project); *Thomas Paine: Voice of Revolution*, a feature-length documentary and museum app (an NEH "We The People" project); *Inside the Glass House: Exploring Philip Johnson*, an interactive mix of long- and short-form documentaries (with the National Trust for Historic Preservation); and *Joe Papp in Five Acts*, a feature-length documentary codirected with Tracie Holder that premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival and will be broadcast by PBS/American Masters in 2022.

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