



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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THE LIFE AND TIMES OF FR. DAVID KIRK

Boyhood in the Deep South

When *Road to Emmaus* was first offered an interview with Orthodox priest Fr. David Kirk of Emmaus House, Harlem, this warm-hearted piece came along as an introduction. When we asked Fr. David about using it as an epigraph to his interview, he brushed its importance aside: "A few people didn't want our story to die with me, so I agreed I'd do something to introduce us to Orthodox parishes. 'Since you don't have much time or energy,' they said, 'just scratch out some notes, the beginnings of Emmaus.' So, I started three times. These are notes I never finished, never corrected... If you use this you'll have to fix it." We agreed, and couldn't offer a more fitting introduction to "The Life and Times of Fr. David Kirk" than his own notes on growing up in the pre-civil rights South.

When people ask me sometimes about my journey, expecting something awesome, often I will try to keep my feet on the ground by honestly saying that I was born in Louisville, Mississippi, March 12, 1935, 65 miles from Tupelo, Mississippi, where Elvis Presley was born about three months later. I was born poor and into an apartheid South, my family moving about like working gypsies, just staying alive.

But I never really knew I was poor. My mother took pieces of used clothing, patched and reworked them, starched them like brick, and I went to school feeling like the best kept boy in town, with my hair curled; the older girls loved to play with it. Of course, our housing always gave me away. When we lived on one side of the Mississippi River, in Mississippi, we lived in a little house my father built, which my fellow students saw as a "log cabin."

Opposite: Davey Kirk with sister Barbara.

When we lived on the other side of the river in Arkansas, with its history of flood, we lived in a flat house built on 20' tall stilts, ready for floods, which shamed me. In school, once, we were told to draw our houses, and I did so, cutting the stilts down to about 4'. There was always one nasty kid who would shout, "That's not really his house, Teacher. He lives on stilts."

Wherever we went, I was taught personal responsibility, taking care of myself materially at the age of 13, working after school, and raising a bull annually to sell for clothes for myself and my sisters. This pattern continued as I continued my education, which I had to finance myself – BA at the University of Alabama, where I had scholarships and held down two jobs: waiting on tables in a restaurant, and answering the nighttime phone in the local whorehouse (plenty of time to study). Later, while at the Catholic Worker and doing my MA at Columbia University, I exchanged some "work" hours in the library for free tuition, etc.

The question often asked of me is, "How did you move from living within a racist family context (my grandfather owned slaves, a pride to most) and the Jim Crow South?" You only think about this in hindsight. The fact that we were poor meant that the nearest white people might be 10 miles away; my playmates were almost always black, living in the shacks near us sharecroppers. I was told at 12, abruptly, that I could not play with my friends. This was a question no one would answer and I was determined to find the answer.

Seeking Truth on the Banks of the Mississippi

I was blessed with an older brother who was a dreamer like me, who kept telling me again and again, "Read, read, read, and listen to others who can add to your knowledge. Learn, learn, learn, and be open." I don't know how it could happen, but in a little used bookstore in Elaine, Arkansas, I found two small books, one by then V.P. Henry Wallace, and another by the singer/actor Paul Robeson on racism and genocide. Obviously, nobody on the River was going to be buying those two books and I negotiated for the two at a dime each. The lady who sold them to me looked like she was glad to get rid of them, but she was as nervous as if she was selling hardcore porn to a 12-year-old.

I stayed up all night reading them both. I was excited. I was so excited. It's like I had been living in a world of darkness and suddenly a little light hit on me. I would find this experience happening again and again in my life.

A little more light cracking through the door, a little piece of truth. From now on, I knew I was to become a seeker of truth, even though I had yet to meet the Spirit of Truth. I had found a field, oh my, with pearls of great price, and my task was to dig for the truth. But something told me, "This is dangerous, you are alone, and this must be a secret journey."

All through my boyhood, I must say I loved the South in certain ways: the easygoing life; my mother's deep sense of hospitality to others (which led to my own natural sense); the sounds of things – like a swinging screen door or rain on the tin roof of the small porch where I slept. The smells of collard greens or butter freshly churned. The Huckleberry Finn moments on the River. All these years I was dreaming and it was always this: that one day I was going to leave these towns which were becoming painful to me, and I was going to travel to a great Golden City, where I could say everything and do everything. And in this Golden City, I would find a heroic brotherhood or community who would be risking their lives for humanity and truth.

My farm job was often as water boy. I was a water boy in the cotton fields, bucket half my size, dragging water from person to person. We normally had not had "running water" or a bathroom... (saving excrement to fertilize vegetables, we were organic without knowing it!) But I also brought buckets and buckets of water for house cooking and cleaning. Always dreaming of the heroic community up ahead, I would forget and leave my buckets at every fence, and have to repeat it all.

But the spring of clear water seemed to be "in Technicolor," like a scene from "The Yearling"... When I got to the spring, I would lie on the grass and dig my toes and hands into the rich dark soil. Sometimes I actually got naked, and would look with wonder at the clouds and sky, and at the beauty around me. Sometimes, I think that this was a boy's first experience with God, sensing the glory of God's creation. How had all this beauty happened, I wondered.

By 17, I had read myself into democratic socialism, the harmony and equality of peoples and sharing of resources. My brother saw me filling out an application to the Socialist Party USA. He tore it up, shouting, "If you fill that out, you'll never be able to get a job in America!" Of course, he was right; it was the middle of the McCarthy era, in which anyone who was even into human rights might be suspected, lose his job, or even be arrested. I simply got another application and became a member. My point was that while... I did not know then exactly where I was headed, I knew I was not



Pearl Buck.

headed Senator McCarthy's way. I don't know how it happened, but I must have been the first young applicant to the party. In any case, Norman Thomas, that grand old man of American socialism, presidential candidate, and human rights defender of everyone, took an interest in me; my first mentor. He gave me a reading list, and would often send me books you couldn't find in southern libraries. If I asked him questions about China, he would begin there and put me in touch with Pearl Buck, writer of great books about China at that time. She would type eight page letters to this boy! If I asked how corporations could be controlled against greed, he called Upton Sinclair, and he would call and send books, including his book on the meat-packing industry. I was going to school outside of the established school with great teachers.

Racism: White Boys Can Jump

Racism. As a sophomore in high school in Alabama, my girlfriend Gale and I were editors of the school paper. At the time, there was literally no way you could meet with black people and have a real conversation. I had to know. We went to the school superintendent and asked if we could do a report on black schools; we felt our chances were on the level of a snowball in hell, but we could try – we were allowed two weeks, extended to a month, to attend full-time at a black school. The conditions were as bad as expected. More important: we found ourselves surrounded by young black students and teachers who asked questions like, "If I can cook your food, why can't I sit down and eat it with you?" (An English teacher).

I came out of that month shocked and radicalized and ready for my first year at the University of Alabama. Suddenly the Supreme Court announced the desegregation of education facilities, the first to be Ms. Autherine Lucy at the University of Alabama that fall. A handful of us formed a protection group to surround her to classes. Mobs with broken-down cars and shotguns sticking around. Students were acting like mobs. I went around to all the chaplains asking for help. Every Protestant chaplain said that race separation was "God's Will," but one Catholic priest affirmed us through this curiosity.

I started looking at religion, wondering why the "Catholic" side of Christianity better understood humanity. This began a superficial search into

churches. Friends took me to their Baptist or Methodist church services, but they were more centered on one man speaking, while the RC church seemed "more mysterious than mystery." I stopped the search for a few moments.

In the meantime, violence filled the campus. This was a month after the same students danced and applauded Louis Armstrong's concert (not caring that no hotel would let him or his band stay, so a few of us had to find them places in black homes). On the last day, going with Autherine to class, a violent, shouting mob chased her. We rushed her into the nearby library, locked the doors, moved every student or worker out. We stayed there 'til 3 a.m., then skipped her out to safety when everyone seemed to be gone, tucked her onto the floor of the backseat, covered by a blanket. Autherine was alive and back home. She was never allowed to return. Years later, under President Kennedy, two other black students entered and ended segregation there.

It was not pleasant for the few of us who defended her. Just not the usual friendliness. ...I was picked up by a car of white hillbillies, driven to a corn field, beat up and left there. A farmer picked me up on a nearby road and took me to the university hospital. But I was ready to go jump in the water again. I was getting closer to finding that heroic community up ahead.

Before this crisis and during it, I felt I needed someone who was both southern and with integrity to help me figure out what to do. Ironically, I saw a film that summer, based on a book by William Faulkner, "Intruder in the Dust." Faulkner, a Nobel Prize winner, still lived at his home in Oxford, Mississippi. I had read that he never answered letters, but this film made me think he understood my situation. "Intruder" was about a southern white boy who unintentionally develops a relationship with a black man and helps the latter when he is accused of murder.

Years before, when I was a 12-year-old "River Rat," as we were called in Arkansas, we had black neighbors; Clint and his wife. I had little to do with black adults, but Clint was different. He would teach me things about the river and the trees and things that grow in the earth, and what you could eat if you ever got lost. We had a friendship. Suddenly, Clint's wife was murdered and the police were there. I just knew that Clint did not do it. I saw how Sarah, his wife, was when Clint was working for my father in town. She would be working in the cotton field, and as a water boy, I would see her and a handsome man slip off into the woods together, separately saying they



Upton Sinclair.

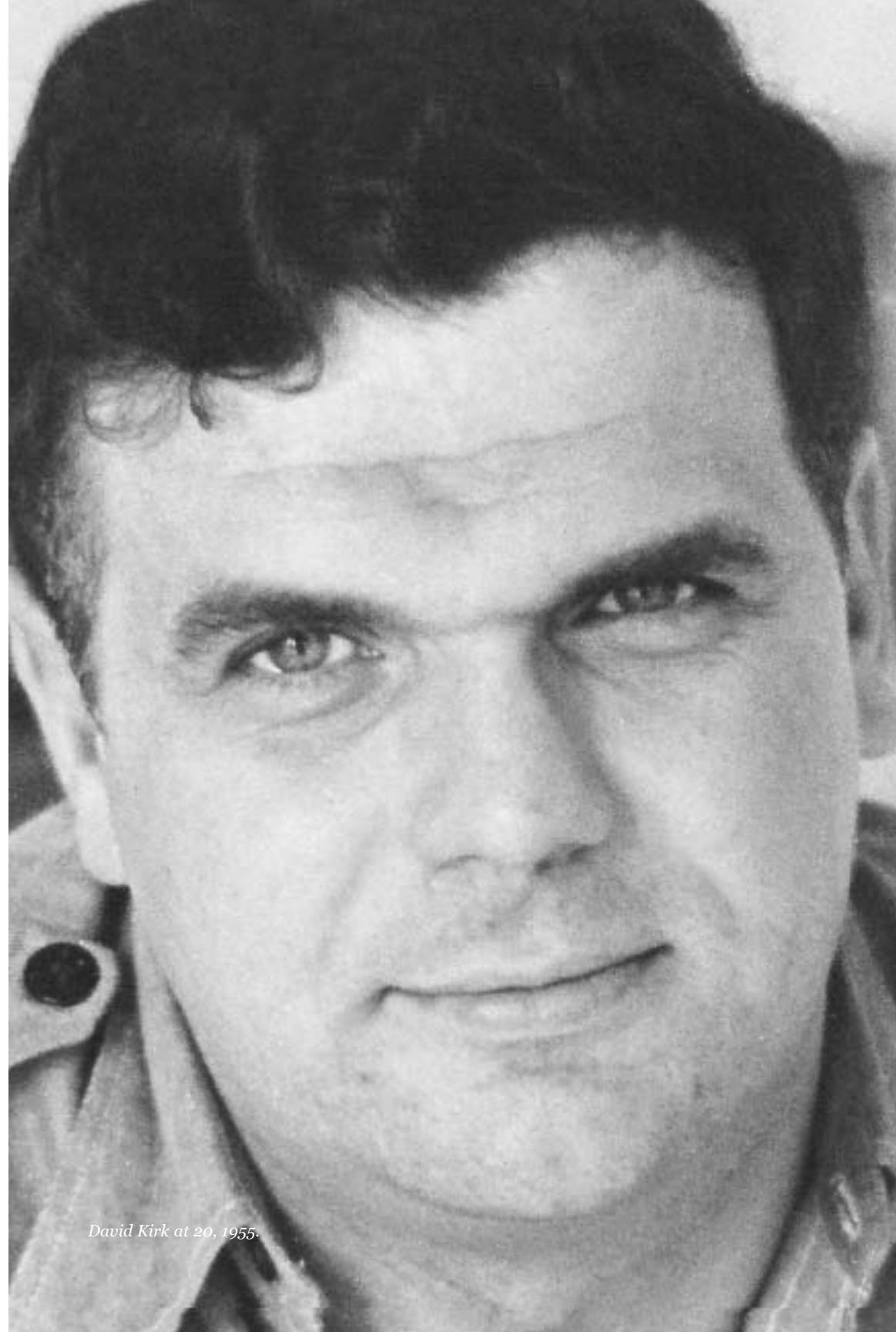


William Faulkner.

were going to the bathroom. I followed them once or twice and they were “doing dirty things.” But I didn’t want to hurt Clint and tell anyone. She disappeared, others told about their fights, and the police finally said, “Just another nigger killing a nigger.” I felt she’d run off with that man, who never showed up again, but nobody would even listen to a boy. I felt that Clint had gone to the woods where he used to show me things, and I found him there. Every night at 7:30, I brought food and blankets. “Sure as I know,” my mother would say, “there was enough chicken left from last night to eat tonight.” After awhile I told Clint where Daddy had tools and that there was one I never saw him use. He could take that and sell it to get to Louisiana. He hugged me goodbye, calling me “Davy,” as he always did.

A Boy and Mr. Faulkner

Anyway, I began corresponding with Faulkner every couple of days; things were happening fast. He had good advice on organizing; on interconnecting (suggested, as I did, reaching the students who were sitting-in at drugstores in North and South Carolina, planning the Freedom Rides, etc. I realize now that I was a part of the pioneer network, pre-civil rights, before the larger Martin Luther King campaigns, to which I related after as well. But please understand, I was never a leader. I was a foot soldier, there to support, which I thought was the white person’s role.) Faulkner released one letter to me as his personal statement on civil rights, which was printed in every paper in the nation. Later, this event and correspondence showed up in a book, “Letters That Shaped America,” a set representing each decade of history; for example, Jefferson and Lafayette for the early 1800’s; the 50’s, “Faulkner and Kirk”. I had all that correspondence ‘til the next year... +



David Kirk at 20, 1955.