

GEORGE ROTH INTERVIEW

R. I always thought of Jon as an intellectual rather than a doer of things. Over the phone to the newspaper man I said what I believe is true that he, as a cadet, too, he was somebody who believed in acting upon what he believed. It was not surprising to me that he should have gone into this and I also got the impression that he did not regard this as the central thing of his going. The newspapers maybe said that a civil rights worker is a professional agitator.

He talked about teaching and parish work as some of his interests - this was in his conversation with me in June. He was much more vivid to me from that than from his cadetship because I think we talked more and more seriously.

S. Can you remember any of the other things you talked about at that time?

R. Well, we talked about christian commitment. He told me how he hit some sort of bottom in which life seemed meaningless to him and he really had to find a meaning in life. He spoke of the feeling of freedom which he had that came from this commitment - it sounded like somebody in the new testament talking. The only time I ever heard somebody speak so freely and wholeheartedly and convincingly. He said it was a wonderful feeling that anything that happened to you didn't matter.

S. Do you think that he was referring to that statement - to the possibility of this actually costing his life or for anyone making this kind of commitment.

R. I took it both in a symbolic and literal sense, I thought at the time that he seemed to have this double meaning.

S. Had you noticed any sort of strain in his writing from his cadet days? Questions about sort of the meaning of life and death - this kind of thing?

R. I hate to speak about this short story I think I remember because it was rather sensational, but if I recall it correctly it did indicate that, yes.

S. Do you have the story?

R. I'll see if I can find it when we finish talking. <sup>S</sup> Going back to that conversation you had with Colonel Dillard, was Colonel Dillard present then?

R. No, he wasn't he had been at Dillard's and then he came to my house afterwards.

S. At that time, if you can take that conversation and think back to cadet days.

R. I think that all the while he was a cadet he was turning over in his mind just in practical terms whether to go on to the seminary or to go to graduate school in English or to do neither and I know that he was very uncertain in his last year particularly, but I'm afraid that then I didn't burrow much beneath the surface in talking to him, perhaps Col. Dillard did. Yes, I think very much that this was working itself out. I haven't any concrete evidence except his uncertainty.

George Roth Interview  
Continued -

S. Do you have any thoughts about why he went in this state of doubt, or what it was that sort of lead him to the bottom?

R. My recollection is not very good, but it seemed to me he spoke of some family problems - his sister.

S. His father's death?

R. He did not mention his father's death and neither did I. He just put it into a general phrase - "personal things". He did mention thinking about what had happened to his sister.

S. He didn't go into anything personal - things in his own life? Not that other people had brought to his life, but in that area of inner concern.

R. My recollection is too hazy to bring back anything like that. It seems to me he just skittered lightly over that. For instance in talking about his experiences in Alabama, which I think we talked more about than himself, and what led him there.

S. He was discussing the intellectual life in a letter, the kind of existential involvement, this for him was not reconciled at least at the time. Can I be an intellectual, ought I be a scholar.

R. As I said he seemed to regard this as something he was going to do now, but that he would finish doing and would go on to do something else, whether this was a delusion or compromise or just the way he happened to be feeling at that time. My impression was that he did not want me to feel that this was what he regarded as he did, of course, speak somewhat disparagingly of people who went down there to take part in demonstrations and pack up and go on home feeling good. He said that I'd written an article.....

S. Did Jon have problems here at V.M.I. at school?

R. Yes, I think he did, but he didn't tell me about them.

S. He was not severely disciplined?

R. No, no- he fit in all right. He felt it was pretty childish, most intelligent cadets go. He played ball with it all right. I will tell you something that he said in June that I feel perhaps I oughtened to say. I chided him a little bit for not having replied to a questionnaire, a self- study required by the regional association.