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Morris Dees (with Steve Fiffer). A lawyer's journey : the Morris Dees story. Chicago: American Bar Association, 2001

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Review:

Morris Dees (with Steve Fiffer). *A Lawyer's Journey: The Morris Dees Story*. Chicago: American Bar Association, 2001.

Last Fall, as I approached the Ralph Pappito School of Law, a man with a friendly smile held out a flier. "Are you here for the event?" he asked. In the friendliness I sensed something else—my fear instinct kicked in.

"Morris Dees is trying to ruin the Southern way of life," the man said.

"You're talking to the wrong person," I said and walked on by.

I must admit I wasn't really familiar with Dees or the Southern Poverty Law Center—I drew my knowledge of his character from popular culture, not from facts. Still, I was pretty sure this fellow was talking to the wrong person.

Throughout Dees' presentation I was on edge, keeping an eye on this man, keeping an eye on a University security officer. During the question and answer period, the man—aggressive and hateful—insisted upon being heard. Dees cut him off, to the embarrassing delight of the audience. When the man left at the rebuff, the audience applauded as though righteousness had prevailed. But is it righteous to curtail someone's speech?

Dees apparently didn't think so, pausing thoughtfully to say he might have been wrong and that he would take the man's questions outside at the reception.

When I recently read Dees' autobiography, an updated version of his 1991 *A Season for Justice, A Lawyer's Journey*, two things rang true. Dees has led a dangerous life and curtailing speech is a complicated matter.

Literally, Dees' life has been fraught with danger. He's been a headliner on a Klan hit list. The Southern Poverty Law Center, which he founded to defend the impoverished against prejudice, has been leveled by arson perpetrated by a Klan-associated group. In response, Dees has nearly had to make a security fortress of home and work. His children have carried guns in self-protection. As for the issue of free speech—Dees has argued in court, "But I do not want you to come back with a verdict against the Klan because they have unpopular beliefs. In this country you have the right to have unpopular beliefs just as long as you don't turn those beliefs into violent action that interferes with somebody else's rights . . ." (327).

Yet when these unpopular beliefs are published in such documents as the Kloran Klan in Action Constitution that outline procedures for instituting violent white supremacy, when Klan violence against black men occurred just over 20 years ago (Michael Donald lynched in 1981 and Bobby Person hunted down in 1983), when Tom Metzger, founder of the White Aryan Resistance and Skinhead leader, has been "a regular guest on syndicated television talks shows" and funded "his own talk shows on cable television, a national newspaper, and telephone hotlines" (337)—one must wonder about the relation between speech and action. No matter that due to Dees' work "The United Klans of America is no more" (335).

Literally and figuratively, Dees has led the dangerous, examined life. As our students often consider, there is a real-life, but risky connection between who one is, what one knows, and how one acts. Dees exemplifies this connection.

In his autobiography, Dees describes his Southern roots. The son of a cotton farmer, Dees accepted his Southern identity, where Christianity and racism coexisted without question. At a

young age he aspired to be a preacher, but his father encouraged him to be a lawyer. Married prior to attending college, he sought a way to make ends meet while pursuing his degree. He discovered he had a knack for the entrepreneurial, establishing a successful mail order business to support his family. He acknowledges, "Truth be told. I was much more concerned about making money than I was about making waves" (70). However, a number of events made him "seriously [examine] the Southern way of life" (76).

One was the murder of a black adolescent, Emmett Louis Till, by two white men for "uppityness" (76). Till dared to address a white woman casually. Another occurred when Dees challenged his Bible study group to consider the wrongful treatment of Autherine Lucy, a black woman who attempted enrolling at the University of Alabama. On his father's farm he had worked side-by-side with the blacks his father employed: "In Autherine Lucy's face, I saw the faces of many of the black people I had known in the Mount—Little Buddy, Miss Perri Lee, Wilson, Clarence" (77). Still when Dees was relieved of his position as Bible study leader, he admits, "I was too busy trying to make good grades and a good money to consider civil rights" (78).

However, when Dees asked his church members to pray for the four little girls killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, when Dr. Martin Luther King proclaimed that "this tragic event may cause the white South to come to terms with its conscience," (qtd. in Dees 86), when "the blood drained from [his] friend's faces" during a service where he asked for monetary support for the girls' families—Dees found his calling. As he writes, "Years later Beverly [his first wife] would look back at this day and say, 'That was the beginning. You knew your life was going to change and you had to go on with it'" (88).

His life did change when Bobby Shelton sat at his defense table while Dees defended Claude Henley for assaulting a television reporter during a race riot and members of the Freedom Riders legal team demanded to know why. Shelton, as it turns out, was a preeminent Klan leader. When asked by two Freedom Riders, "'How can you represent people like that?'" (84), Dees was "shaken" (85). Feeling "the anger of a black person for the first time," Dees states, "My actions, my morality, had been challenged" (85).

A Lawyer's Journey describes the results of that challenge: the establishment of Klanwatch to track and guard against Klan activities; when the Dees' legal team took Bobby Shelton down; when the team legally connected mutated white supremacist groups to the United Klans of America and Michael Donald's death was vindicated; when Dees took on the Klan to protect the Vietnamese Fishermen's Association in Galveston, Texas.

If anything, the book is stuffed with Dees' zeal. Readers may get lost in the zealous details of his journey. But when read in light of Dees' personal transformation, the book offers inspiration for those who are called to work on behalf of the disenfranchised.

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