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## Interview with Father Richard Lawrence

**Maria:** Alright so let's get started. First of all can you state your full name please?

**Father Lawrence:** Richard Thomas Lawrence, L-A-W-R-E-N-C-E.

**Maria:** Ok. And in the years surrounding 1968, how old were you, where did you live, where did you work, where did you...what your life situation generally...

**Father Lawrence:** Ok. Sure. I was born December the 3<sup>rd</sup> 1942 in Baltimore, from a five generation Baltimore family. At that point I was finishing my seminary training, in coordination with the Catholic priesthood, the last year before ordination to the priesthood you are ordained to the *deacon*. So in June of '67 I was ordained as a deacon and assigned full time to the church of St. Gregory the Great on Gilmore and Baker St. and then when the school year began I was assigned there part time, nights and weekends, until I was promoted to the priesthood in May of '68 and then transferred to Church of the Blessed Sacrament over in Northeast Baltimore, where I served until 1973, and then I came here, and I've been here ever since. So that's it, quick summary of it. I've been working during my seminary period, largely in inner city churches in West Baltimore. I worked with Austin Healey at St. Martin's; I worked with Joe Connelly at St. Gregory's so I've gotten to know the neighborhood reasonably well. At St. Gregory's, one of the things that I was doing was constructing the catechumens, people were preparing to be baptized and of course this is just before holy week, so it's getting to be a very intense period for the catechumens and we're conducting a session on Thursday night, and Father Reid, the pastor came in and said he just heard on the radio that Dr. King had been shot. We stopped and paused for prayer and then went on with the

discussion and he came back, I don't know 20, 30, or 40 minutes later and told us that Dr. King was dead. At that point we just sat there and prayed and cried, and prayed and cried. By then the catechumens went home and I went up in the bell tower, Father Reid was too old to expect to handle that kind of thing personally and struck Great Toll. You know the custom of Great Toll? Minute bells. You ring the C major bell once a minute, counting the years, up to the year of the age of the deceased. That way people listening, know who it's for. Many of the people in the neighborhood said that's how they learned of the death of Dr. King, they heard the bell tolling at St. Gregory's, turned the radio on to see what it was about. That was Thursday night. Friday night Washington erupted...

**Maria:** I'm sorry if I may interject.

**Father Lawrence:** Surely.

**Maria:** Just before we go on and talk more about the riots, we just wanted a little more background. Were you living near the church at the time?

**Father Lawrence:** Catholic clergy were sleep-in help.

**Maria:** Ok, so you sleep at the church? Ok.

**Father Lawrence:** Well on the weekends. Now full time, 7 nights a week during the summer, and then during the school year I was Monday through Friday sleeping at seminary, and Friday, Saturday and Sunday sleeping at the parish, back and forth between the two.

**Maria:** But you spent a good deal of your time at the church?

**Father Lawrence:** Oh yeah. So I was fairly well known on the street, I could eat ribs at 2 o'clock in the morning at the little joint down the street on Baker Street, I knew people and people knew me.

**Maria:** Right. And in that vein, what sorts of interactions, before all of this occurred, what sorts of interactions did you have on a daily basis with people of other races?

**Father Lawrence:** Well you know, the parish was predominantly Black, so most of my parishioners were Black. The Parish council was African-American, the administrators of the Eucharist were African-American, people in the pews were mostly African-American. We'd had, still have only a couple of African-American priests, so most of the clergy were white but it was very much a...well I guess we still had 15-20% of white folks in the pews but it was largely an African-American parish, plus I'd been active in the neighborhood with the civil rights movement. I heard the 'I have a dream' speech, I could take you to Washington today and show you the tree that I was sitting under in 1960, well standing under, you couldn't sit down, I mean the parts of the crowd were too big. When I heard that speech, I showed that to one of my nieces a year or two ago, and she looked at me and she said 'oh my God', it didn't occur to her that people were that old. Things that I think of as memories, she thinks of as history.

**Nyasha:** So how else were you involved in Civil Rights as far as Baltimore is concerned?

**Father Lawrence:** Well I was on demonstrations with CORE, marched many a picket line, you remember the, well you don't remember it was way before your time, but you probably read of, the long series of demonstrations at the Horizon House on Calvert St, which simply *ex professo* would not rent to African-Americans period, I mean it was in black and white in the contract and we demonstrated there, Walter Carter was the leader for that for, I guess maybe a year or more, every Saturday. I remember being carefully out maneuvered, well we were, by General Gelston, who was at that time acting police commissioner. You know at the beginning we had a good bit of press for this

demonstration and after a while it was just on and on, it was going nowhere, so we decided we had to up the ante. So we decided we were going to extend the line up Calvert St and sit down. All was cleared, everything with the police, they were upstage the other side, so we told them what we were gonna do and they had more police in there than usual, and the commissioner himself showed up. When we moved out across Calvert St and sat down, a couple of cops were ready to draw their night sticks, you know come take us away forcibly and have some fun in the process. Gelston said 'Sergeant, take two men down the street and re-route the traffic there, Sergeant take two men that way, re-route the traffic there.' 'And you're really gonna let them do that?' Gelston looked at him and said, 'What is today's date?' 'August the 10<sup>th</sup>', I don't know what it was, but something in August. 'And what's the temperature?' '97 sir, what's that got to do with it?' 'What do you think the temperature of that asphalt is? I'm gonna let them sit there till their asses fry, it won't be long.' [laughter] After about 15 minutes we had to get up and move because we couldn't take it any more. He wouldn't give us the big you know Selma bridge kind of pictures we were hoping for. Beautiful.

**Maria:** And when you were growing, where did you grow up in Baltimore?

**Father Lawrence:** Pikesville

**Maria:** Pikesville. Ok. So when you were growing up before you entered the seminary, what were your interactions with people of other races before then?

**Father Lawrence:** Virtually none until high school. We were religiously and economically integrated, but we were not racially integrated. While I went to high school I had a black class mate, Ken Montague, the former superintendent for the Department of Criminal Justice, former state senator, was my classmate.

**Nyasha:** How do you spell his name? His last name?

**Maria:** Montague as in Romeo's family?

**Father Lawrence:** Yeah. M-O-N-T-A-G-U-E.

**Nyasha:** Okay.

**Maria:** And where did you go to high school?

**Father Lawrence:** Loyola. The Jesuit high school here in Baltimore and then two years at Loyola College, and then two years at the old seminary on Paca St. and then four years at the graduate school out in Roland Park.

**Maria:** And before the riots, what was the racial mood like in Baltimore? When you were working or whenever else...

**Father Lawrence:** It was a long struggle but mostly boring. We never had the kind of violence they had in other cities, just a lot of sort of dug in racism that needed to be pried out one little step at a time. From the amusement park, the famous Gwyn Oak demonstration, to residential things like the Horizon House to getting into public accommodations law, what not, what not and what not. To give you an example, when I was in college, and we were going up to a debating tournament in New York, and we had a bus, and we stopped at a restaurant up Route 40 somewhere in Hartford County, Cecil County, for something to eat. Tom Curtis was African-American, he was on the team. The manager came over and told the moderator that he would have to be served outside, so as though it made no difference at all, we all were waiting till they had it all prepared and ready to be served, got up and walked out. The manager came running after us, he says 'You got to pay for these 40 dinners!' 'No, we ordered 40 dinners not 39, if you're

prepared to serve all 40 us then we'll come in eat them and pay for them, if not call the police.'

**Maria:** What did they do?

**Father Lawrence:** Walked away and ate the 39 dinners. We stuck 'em with a few bucks, but you know little things like that, chip away, chip away, chip away. So it was not by any means explosive, but there was a lot of thoroughly institutionalized racism that just had to be ground out. It's like a dentist grinding out a cavity in a molar.

**Maria:** And did your job pretty much dictate your social life?

**Father Lawrence:** Well yeah, yeah. You're in seminary and that pretty well does it.

**Maria:** It's full time. Ok. Because usually we ask people, because people will have professional relationships with people of other races but maybe not social relationships and in your case it was both...

**Father Lawrence:** Well I keep saying this was a classmate of mine, the Dr. Askew Sanders, the Deputy Superintendent of Education, was a seminary classmate of mine at Paca St. in Roland Park so you know, we hung out together, same as everybody else, but there weren't a large number, there still aren't a large number, well now there aren't a large number of anybody, you know, locations get fewer and fewer.

**Maria:** You told us about how you heard about the assassination, so let's go back to what you were saying before, about Friday is when the riots started in DC you said.

**Father Lawrence:** Right. So we figured Baltimore for Saturday, so I called the director at the seminary and said I may not be back for Monday's classes, and he said, let me know when you come back. And I said I want Ed Kelly sent down here to help me this weekend, Ed was a friend of mine assigned to a parish in the suburbs where they didn't

really need him that weekend, he said I'll call him. Then we set up with our radio and started listening. Then Saturday night I just went for a walk, we were 3 blocks from north of Pennsylvania, so I walked up and down Pennsylvania Ave to see what was going on and not much was going on. Crowds started to gather, people walking up and down, police sitting in the cars with their doors locked, waiting for reinforcements. And then you began with a little window breaking, a little looting here and there people, groups however large charging up and down, but just as this was getting started, to give you an idea of the way it had to work if you were gonna be a referee. You had to have credibility on both sides, and this is largely priests, ministers, civil rights workers, social workers, people who had enough institutional creed and credibility to be able to work with the establishment, and been on the street long enough that people knew them. So I'm walking down Pennsylvania Ave and a voice from the back goes 'Hey baby, hey whitey, you shoulda been out here 4 years ago' and I heard a voice from behind me and I looked around, belonged to a guy could play linebacker who says 'He was baby, where the bleep bleep was you?' [laughter]. Permission stamped, may proceed. So all of us, and that included the real leaders like you know Vernon Dobson and Marion Baskem, you've heard these names? You've interviewed these people?

**Nyasha:** We're supposed to interview Vernon Dobson soon.

**Father Lawrence:** Now Vernon's mind is failing, and his body too, well he must be pushing 90, so you may have to be, well first of all be very gentle and second of all keep at it you know, as things prod, something will spark and he'll talk. But that man is a fountain of knowledge, knows more about the civil rights progress in Baltimore as any



man alive. Another man you need to talk to is Dr. Homer Favor, has he been put on your list?

**Maria:** Sounds familiar

**Father Lawrence:** Dr. Weber just retired 2 years ago as professor of Urban Studies at Morgan State University; I think he had taught there like 40 or 50 years before he retired.

**Nyasha:** How do you spell his last name?

**Father Lawrence:** F-A-V-O-R. His mind is still very sharp and he is the absolute gentleman. He has tickets maybe 6 rows ahead of me at the symphony and he'd stop and chat. I always used to go with my mother and she was getting frailer and frailer and one night I was there alone and Dr. Favor was 20 years older than I am, has rank on me anyway you want to count it and does not have not to notice that I am alive, walks over, sticks out his hand and says 'Father, I'm sorry about your mother'. He took one look at my face and knew that she was dead. This is a mench, as our Jewish brothers and sisters call him. So he's really somebody you need to interview, plus knowing who was who and who did what all the way back. Go talk to him. So you know people like that were on the streets and then people of lesser rank who'd been in the movement for a decade or two and then people like me who had only been around for a couple of years. *I was enlisted but anybody helped, basically anybody who tells you the Baltimore riots were organized, orchestrated or planned is full of bullshit, make that full of bull for the written record. This is going to be reserved in the public archives; I should probably be more restrained about my language [laughter].* Everything happened quite spontaneously, I heard things happened, I saw things happen, they just happened as they went, it was un-programmed but it was an extraordinarily civilized civil disobedience. Very civil disobedience, for

instance it was not a race riot, it really wasn't. Bolton Hill, lies side by side with Pennsylvania Ave, for 6 or 8 blocks, nothing happened in Bolton Hill, nobody went over there, they weren't out to get white folks, if they wanted white folks there were plenty of rich white folks 4 blocks away, nobody went after 'em. It wasn't about that, it was about getting somebody to notice. I'll tell you the story that I told that Sunday morning, after I had worked the streets *till about 5 of course I caught a nap and didn't amass until Palm Sunday morning.* And we changed the readings, of course we had the passion reading, it was always the gospel on Palm Sunday but then for the second reading we used the martyrdom of Steven from Acts because it's patterned by Luke so deliberately on the martyrdom of Christ so I said that pattern goes on and it goes on until today, it went on with Dr. King and it's going on in Baltimore now. I was on the street when the National Guard began to arrive, I guess this was 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, maybe later, Saturday night, Sunday morning. And do you know who was in the National Guard in 1968? Danny Quail, by the thousands, suburbanite kids with influential daddies in Baltimore police and the Guard so they wouldn't have to go to Saigon. Tight, white, suburbanite, most of them had never been in the ghetto, much less patrolled one. When they rolled down Pennsylvania Ave in those dussenhams their eyes were as big as saucers, they were so scared the uniform of the day should've included rubber pants. But their discipline held, and I'll tell you a reason why it held. George Gelston who beat us you know a few years before, was at this time actually the General of the National Guard, and he was an old military man, he was under no illusion of commanding crap troops, he knew what he had. So the last order that was read to these kids that was ordered to be read to them last was, weapons are to be carried unloaded, clips for the weapons are to be

carried in the breast pocket of the uniform jacket, weapons may be loaded only on direct command of a commissioned officer, thereafter weapons may be employed on direct command of an officer, commissioned or not commissioned and or in direct and immediate protection of human life, paragraph, any civilian death resulting in contravention of these orders, shall constitute murder in the first degree. The guardsman responsible shall be tried on the scene by summary court martial and shall be shot by order, Gelston, commanding. That order wasn't live, it couldn't have been live, a summary court martial can't even take a stripe off your sleeve much less have you shot, the most a summary court martial can give you is 90 days in the stockade, but he knew these kids wouldn't know that and would panic them into complying with orders. I have a friend who was a platoon sergeant who read this poor little thing to his platoon and he says any questions and the kid in the back says 'yes sir!', 'God dammit soldier, how many times do I have to tell you, you don't call me sir, you call me sergeant, my parents were married!'. 'Yes sergeant!' 'Alright soldier what's your question?' 'Sergeant, what's a summary court martial?' [laughter- jumbled words]. He said he paced back and forth with the straightest face he could muster and then finally turned around and said I want all you men to listen up and listen up good, cause I'm gonna answer that soldier's question, and it's very important for all of you, you understand me?'. 'Yes sergeant!' 'Alright, a summary court martial is when your commanding officer C.O. appoints the judge, the jury, and the firing squad, all at the same time, you understand me?' 'Yes sergeant, yes sergeant.' And their discipline held, by margin, by hair breadth sometimes. 3 or 4 times that week I was backed up against the wall with an M-1 pointed at my head by some 19 year old National Guardsman. It can be a panic producing experience, cause

while you know they're not supposed to be loaded, looking down the barrel you can't tell. Police were great, I was never prouder of the Baltimore city police than I was that week. [Phone rings] Excuse me just a second. Good afternoon, St. Vincent's. Speaking...

[Recording paused]

[Recording resumed] So, where did I stop?

**Maria:** The police.

**Father Lawrence:** Oh yeah, the police were really good. There were some screw ups, for instance across the street from the rectory, up along Gilmore St, were a bunch of , I forget, 3 or 4 storey row houses, all in a row, the row was unbroken all the way up. Somebody, there was a gun shot, I was at the door cause I was sitting right there, by the time I got out there, which a matter of seconds, there was a police car in the street and 2 cops, officers out of it, so I don't think that anybody in the neighborhood had fired, I think one of the police had fired and realized he wasn't supposed to have, and then got back on the radio called it in as shots fired to cover himself, anyway they converged on the scene to signal their assist an officer. Well they decided they better search the roof so they sent two guys up to the roof, well without a lot of forethought, they sent two African-American, plain-clothed officers up on the roof. While they're going up the fire escape, they're no sooner on the top of the roof that somebody on the other side shouts 'There, up on the roof!' then there's this panic, while people are running around on the block screaming 'Hold your fire, police on the roof, plain-clothes police on the roof, hold your fire!'. But it worked, you know, nobody got hit. When we got the army we got the 82<sup>nd</sup> airborne, they were crack outfit, and the people had wonderful discipline, I mean not everybody, if you happened to be a crook, and you happened to be in Baltimore, and you

happened to be African-American, you'd have a field day that week cause everyone's doing everything else. If you owned a liquor store, I don't care how good you were with everybody in the neighborhood or anything else, you were gonna get looted, there wouldn't be anything left. But for instance in West Baltimore there were only two places that were burned to the ground, *but they weren't fire set*, the fire department couldn't put the fires out. Two places they got to they were actually discouraged, I don't think they meant to send you here, they meant to send you to that fire up there, nobody would bother you up there, oh ok, and then they went up the street and let this place burn down. One of them was a white owned general store type place, that was always an unlicensed check cashing agency by an unlicensed loan shark. Now back in the day you could not get a check cashed in a bank unless you had an account in that bank, many of these elderly ladies did not have bank accounts, the only place that would cash your check besides his little store, if you didn't have an account there was the liquor stores. Now you tell this Baptist old lady who was born and bred in rural North Carolina to cash her check in a liquor store, she'll put salt and pepper on it and eat it first, so they're cashing their checks in this guy's store, and he's charging 10% off the top. Now you know I believe in non-violence, it's part of what my religion you know, but if my grandmother were trying to make it on \$187 a month and some so and so was taking \$8.70 off the top of his check, her check, I think I'd burn him down too, and that went to the ground. People, anybody who showed in a fire truck was re-routed. The other one I heard go down. I'm walking up the avenue, I forget, Sunday night, Monday night...

**Maria:** Pennsylvania Avenue?

**Father Lawrence:** Yeah. And a voice behind me says, 'hey baby let's get the (name of the local bar)', the other fellow says, 'we can't do that baby he's soul'. 'That bleep bleeps face may be black but he ain't no soul brother of mine, lets go up there and burn his ass.' And they went up there and they burned his ass and when the fire trucks came they were re-routed and it went to the ground.

**Maria:** What place? What place was it?

**Father Lawrence:** It was a bar on Pennsylvania Avenue, but it wasn't just a bar. The guy who owned the bar also had a franchise for narcotics in the neighborhood. He was selling dope to their kids, and he was burned to the ground, African-American or not, he was burned to the ground, that was score settling time. Opposite example, down on Baltimore St, which even till this day is something of a racial diving line, in those days it was absolute racial diving line; black to north, white to the south period. On the north, i.e. black side of Baltimore Street was a live-over shop that was a small bakery confectionary. A old German couple, used to be a German neighborhood, and when the German kids had a penny she sold them a candy, when they didn't have a penny she gave em a candy. Her husband died, the neighborhood changed, she didn't change. Black kids had a penny she sold em a candy, they didn't have a penny she gave em a candy. I have seen more families take more damage to her in Halloween than this woman took during the riots. Countless kids in the neighborhood took turns sitting on her steps and anything came down the street someone 'not here man, she takes care of my little brother, you carry that on down the street'. There was all that stuff going on that made it very civilized, I'm being spontaneous, if you plan things out, you couldn't have planned out things like that it was just people acting out of their frustration. Anyway, the story I

started to tell you, Saturday night on the street, National Guard starts rolling in, eyes like this, you know, and I was talking to a guy who was out there, and I looked them, and then looked at him, and he looked at them, and then looked at me, I said 'this could get bad', he said 'yep', I said 'maybe it's time to go home, he said 'I can't do that', I said 'These damn fools gonna start shooting people', he said 'probably, but I can't do that', I said 'why not', he said 'Father I've got a wife and two kids', I said 'well you know that sounds like 3 good reasons we should get out of here before the shooting starts'. He said 'Father you don't understand, I know you've been with the demonstrations and all that sort of thing but you were born white and you really can't totally understand. I mean I've done this civil rights thing too, you know it, I've been there, I've been in the marches, I've been in the rallies, you name it. Nobody's listening. Murdering Dr. King was just the last straw that nobody's listening. We can go on demonstrating as long as we want, nobody will listen. I don't know what to try next, but maybe blood flowing in the streets is what it takes. Maybe some of his blood, with some of my blood flows in the streets, then maybe the man will listen. Maybe not, but I've got nothing else left to try. You're not gonna do it, cause I don't care if I get killed, I've got two kids and I'm not going to have them come up in the world I came up in. I'm just not going to have it.' And that's what it was about; it was about people saying I'm not going to have it. You're not going to make me raise my kids in a world I was raised in. I won't stand for that. If it takes my blood flowing in the streets, I won't stand for that.

**Maria:** That's incredible. And besides, you spent a lot of time on Pennsylvania Ave during that...

**Father Lawrence:** Spent a lot of time on Pennsylvania Ave, spent a lot of time on Fulton Ave, a lot of time on Baker Street you know cruising the neighborhood, the part of the neighborhood I knew that knew me, I wasn't trying to...occasionally we had to go over to the other side and what not. We tried to check in with Community Relations Commission, Mills and Noble were running that outfit and they were the home base for referees, so they called me at one point and asked me if I could get somebody in Norwood to check out something over in East Baltimore for them. So I grabbed one of the guys, George Watson's son, was the first African-American to be named department head in a Baltimore Public School, of course he wasn't department head then, he was just fresh out of school teacher and we drove down and crossed the *something (29:12)*. Well downtown everything was a 4-way roadblock, you know National Guard at every corner. We talked our way through the first couple, then we hit this one with this kid, 19 if he lies about his age, with two bright, shiny, new gold stripes on his sleeve, and he's about to let you know what a non-commissioned officer is. 'Don't you know there's a curfew on?' 'Yes I understand I'm have orders to go check this out for the CRC, you know let me go do my job and you do yours.' 'You're not going anywhere, turn this thing around, take it back where you got it.' 'Corporal I have orders, I have to do what I have to do.' He paces back and forth and finally says 'alright I've heard enough out of you, you're under arrest, get out of that car and put you hands above your head.' I said 'alright corporal, if you insist, but before you do I would suggest you check my orders. Now you grab that PFC over there with ANCP6, his eyebrows went up that I could call the serial number of the make and model of his communications equipment. 'You get him to patch you through closet 22000, that's the city hall board, you ask for 2107, that's community relations



commission, you ask for either Mills or Noble, you ask them who I am and what my orders are. And while you're doing that young man, suppose I check your orders, what is your name, rank and serial number and who is your commanding officer?' He looked at me, he looked at the two kids with their bayonets pointed at the windshield, and he looked out of the corner of his eye to his two gold stripes on his sleeve and you could just here him thinking 'I don't want to be a private again.' Went like that [gestures] to the guys with bayonets stepped out of the way and we drove on through, the shortest arrest ever recorded. But you know all the chains of command were all screwed up, you had the police, the army, the National Guard, nobody knew who was who so if you sounded like you had authority, you had authority. I mean I took prisoners away from the United States Army, 'sergeant I'll take charge of this prisoner.' 'Sir?' 'I said sergeant; I'll take charge of this prisoner.' 'Oh, yes sir.' Gave me the prisoner, walked him home, told him to stay there. That's the kind of story I really shouldn't tell cause my attorney says that when you give orders to armed troops of the United States and they obey you, that is considered armed rebellion against the government of the United States and I am eligible to be tried by one of Roberto Gonzales' military commissions and shot by a firing squad before the appeal. I don't think it's going to happen, but I'm technically eligible.

**Maria:** So you were sent to other parts of the city then?

**Father Lawrence:** Just a couple of times to check things out

**Maria:** So where else were the big areas where the riots occurred?

**Father Lawrence:** Well the center Pennsylvania Avenue, between St. Presstman and North Avenue and Gay Street around, between Orleans, Monument, the Gay Street mall,

around that area here, right up the street from here. And you then know, things here, things there, hithering on. But those were the two major pieces.

**Maria:** And you were in both those places at one time or another? Were you on Gay Street? Yeah.

**Father Lawrence:** They established police command posts at Presstman and Pennsylvania and at Gay and Madison perhaps, or Monument, something like that.

**Nyasha:** So the bulk of information you got was from patrolling the streets and going to different areas, so you didn't watch any media like TV or listen to the radio?

**Father Lawrence:** No. I didn't have time to do any. The only radio I would listen to was the police dispatcher, if I was in the office, we had the police dispatch radio on. And if we heard a signal pertaining to anything that was going on in the neighborhood we went back out. Bob Reid was listening to the radio, Bob was 70 years old, one of the quietest, mild manneredest guys, little guys you'd ever want, he was listening to the radio when Governor Agnew gave the speech that made him vice president, he called all the leadership down to Annapolis and told them it was their fault? And I'm gonna say this for the record, Bob Reid, Catholic priest, 70 years old, white guy, very sedate in his language, was so angry, he walked in and said 'that ignorant little motherfucker'. I'd never heard him use that phrase before in all my life. That's what he said about the governor of Maryland.

**Maria:** Wow. So how long was it before you think things until got back to normal?

**Father Lawrence:** Oh lemme see. It started to quiet down about Tuesday or Wednesday, there was still traces of it say Thursday and Friday, by Good Friday it was pretty well over, as I remember it. Then we went into the Holy week liturgies, who knows, it was

about 9 days before I got any sleep. Then I went off to my parents house, cause we had the week off after Easter from seminary, and went to bed. I got up and went to the bathroom, and came down and ate and went to bed. I think I slept for about 2 and a half days.

**Maria:** In Pikesville?

**Father Lawrence:** Yes. It had all been on adrenaline, the adrenaline high is followed by the adrenaline crash. I didn't have enough energy to roll over.

**Maria:** And you were 26 or 25?

**Father Lawrence:** Twenty...let me see, this was '67

**Maria:** '68

**Father Lawrence:** '68, I was 25

**Maria:** When you went home afterwards to your parents' house, how'd it been for them there in Pikesville, do you remember what the feeling was like, you know what their perception of everything was?

**Father Lawrence:** Nothing very much serious that was going on. I mean I called them every once in a while to tell let 'em know I was okay everything was going cool but what you see on television, believe not more than half of it. They weren't, they had better sense than to believe all the sensationalist stuff like the communist agitators had orchestrated the riots to take over the world and all this nonsense that was going on.

**Maria:** But there wasn't any anxiety in the neighborhood about maybe it'll happen here or...

**Father Lawrence:** No.

**Maria:** No, okay.

**Father Lawrence:** Not in that neighborhood. They were 6 blocks outside the city.

**Maria:** Well it's possible.

**Father Lawrence:** Across the street from my parents' house was the National Guard armory, the Pikesville armory, which had been a POW camp during the war, talk about being afraid or not being afraid. When prisoners escaped from the POW camp, they blew a special code on the volunteer fire siren and you know what instructions were, go outside and get your wash off the line and bring it in. Nobody was afraid of these prisoners, they just didn't want them to find civilian clothes they could change into, don't worry about any danger going on in your backyard just go and get the clothes.

**Maria:** Alright. And how do you think in the time after the riots, how do you think Baltimore changed?

**Father Lawrence:** Oh, let me tell more riot stories before I get back to that cause these may never otherwise get recorded I reckon.

**Maria:** Sure.

**Father Lawrence:** Down the street from the rectory, there were two little grocery stores had been looted or in the process of being scavenged. A looter is somebody who thinks he has a right to take somebody else's property, rightly or wrongly, good reason or bad, window breakers. Scavengers, are people, it's just like finding a \$10 bill on the sidewalk, picking up what has become a *rational lios* as the law calls it, a thing without an owner. Little old ladies dusting the glass off of oranges. Well the police got a call from that and they responded with 3 cars from tactical. Four guys to a car, trench coats, helmets and rifles, arrested a couple of little old ladies, stuff 'em in the cars and drove away. 15 minutes later more little old ladies, 20 minutes later, back come some cops. By the end of

3 rounds of this, tempers are getting a little short, comments are being made about people's ancestry, their grandparents' strange sexual preferences and things like that. You know somebody's gonna throw a rock, somebody's going to fire a shot in the air, somebody's going to fire a shot that's not in the air, you know, we don't need this. So I walk back up the street, and I knew that they couldn't have been ranked codes, cause they had 3 different chains of command, they didn't have time to do that, they'd been using open coding. So I dialed 222333, which was the number before 911, the voice said radio police, and I snarled situation room, bleep bleep, because this is going on public record I won't say what I said exactly, and they punched me through. And the voice downstairs said 'Sergeant Fritz, situation room,' I said 'OD bleep bleep,' 'yes sir,' and another extension answered and said 'Major so and so, officer of the day, go ahead sir.' Now he's at Cold Spring Lane, you know where Cold Spring Lane is, the Cold Spring Lane fire house? There's a fire house at Cold Spring and the Alameda that goes 3 floors below ground, concrete and steel, it's the civil defense bunker, they can close the vault door and remain self-contained for 6 weeks, and that's where they were commanding things from. So he's down in the basement bunker and I'm on the red phone, I've got to be somebody, I'm on the red phone. So he said major so and so, officer of the day, and I said 'so and so this is Lawrence, here's the situation at Fulton and Baker, bang bang bang, now you gotta put a squad of troops on that corner and nail it down tight. Keeps those idiots the hell out of there and let the people have it, one way or the other but this cat and mouse business stops or somebody gets hurt, you understand me mister.' 'Yes sir, we'll take care of it sir.' 'You better mister or you'll be held personally responsible for the consequences.' 'Yes sir, thank you for calling sir,' click. 15 minutes later they had a squad of federal

troops on the corner. It never occurred to him to ask who Lawrence was. He'd identified himself by name, rank and post of duty, major so and so, officer of the day, I identified myself by name only and began to snarl, not even a light colonel would talk to a major like that, you have to be at least a full bird to talk like that to a major. He had 3 different outfits going on, he assumed I was a full bird from one of them, and he took orders. Man had been trained all his life to take orders, I made it easy, I gave orders and he took 'em. Take authority, you got it. Well you know we were doing food distribution, cause all the stores that hadn't been looted were locked up tight, it was one or the other. A lot of people bought day by day, go down to the store, buy for the day, well there was no store to go to. So B. Green, down where Camden Yards is now, a big old wholesale grocer, and I called the diocese and asked for \$5,000, a line of credit, and they said you got it. Then I started calling parishes saying the diocese is in for 5, I need one from you, and most of them said you got it, so I'm assembling this \$10,000 line of credit. Then I rented, no I didn't rent, I called headquarters back at Cold Spring Lane, I told them I wanted 10 tons worth of trucks to meet me at B. Green at Russell and Conway in 20 minutes. And he sent...

**Maria:** I'm sorry, that was the name of the store?

**Father Lawrence:** Yeah, B. Green.

**Maria:** B.Green. As in B...

**Father Lawrence:** B, period, Green.

**Maria:** Yeah. Okay.

**Father Lawrence:** They said they couldn't do that and I began to use some very colorful language since I'd already identified myself as a deacon and then said and you can't get

any food in here for these people, and I've got food and you can't get any bleep bleep trucks? I don't wanna hear it, those trucks there. They sent me two 5-toners. I went down there and just walked in and the guy said can I help you sir, I said well yeah let's start with powdered milk, he said how bout this, I said no I want it in 1 quart units so you can get more or less depending on how big the family is, I said fine I'll take 6,000 quarts. 6,000? I said yeah. 'George, Charlie, Frank, get the hell over here!' I bought 10 tons worth of food in about an hour, sent 5 tons to St. Ann's, called the eastside parishes, told them to re-supply off of them, took the 5tons to St. Gregory's, called the Westside parishes, told them to re-supply off of us. And then called the radio stations and said, announcing Catholic churches got food, if you need food go to a Catholic church, there'll be something there. Of course to unload and unload get out this food and that sort of thing meant recruiting people who walk in the door, anybody who looked young enough and strong enough, that could do 4, 5, 8 hours of manual labor, was just hey would you stay and help, yeah sure, put 'em to work. But we're doing re-supply after curfew so I'm sending staff home at 10 o'clock at night and the curfew is at 4pm. Everybody's gonna get locked up, next day I'm gonna have to recruit a whole new bunch of staff. That's not gonna work, so I called and said get me some passes. He said are you kidding York, General York was the army commander, said I wanna issue a pass for the mayor, I said if he wants one tell him to call me, he said what, I said never mind, click. I put our best parish stationary in the typewriter...

Pass, to whom it may concern, this is to identify John Doe. Mr. Doe is engaged in disaster relief operations at a command post duly established of the church of St. Gregory the Great, Baltimore, Maryland. Mr. Doe is also engaged in confidential counter-

intelligence operations for the Community Relations Commission of Baltimore City. All personnel are instructed to extend to Mr. Doe all possible cooperation and assistance, by order, R.T. Lawrence commanding. Signed 'em, seal 'em and gave 'em out. I had one of my men saluted at a roadblock by a regular army 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant! 'Sorry to have troubled you sir!' [laughs] And held his salute when he returned. Fortunately my man had done his two years with uncle and knew the sloppy salute that seniors use for juniors and sergeants, took his pass and go through, you know. If you sounded like authority, you had authority, a lot of us did that and the basic game was no casualties. We're really not gonna try and save anybody's property, well you know, we'll do what we can but we're not gonna make a big deal out of it but we're not gonna get anybody killed and in Baltimore it worked. As far as I know, now there may be more statistics subsequently or different or something but as far as I remember from the time, there were only 3 fatalities from the riot. One was a shopkeeper killed by a looter, one was a looter killed by a shopkeeper, and one was a drunk who died in the DT cause the bars were closed and they called it a riot related death. But the best to my memory, we had no deaths resulting from gunfire at or from people in uniform. No people shot authorities, no authorities shot people. That's what we were most proud of. Cause we kept telling either side, the other side is heavily armed and they won't shoot first. The first shot fired then was gonna be a bloody blood bath. And we told the authorities that about the people and we told the people that about the authorities. I don't think we were lying in either case.

**Nyasha:** So how did you learn about using fake authority, I guess?



**Father Lawrence:** [laughter] My father was an internal security investigator for the Treasury department, it's amazing how much information you can get from somebody who didn't even know who he was even talking to. So I learned a few tricks from him.

**Maria:** Yeah, that's incredible.

**Father Lawrence:** If you sound like you know what you're doing, people will generally assume you know what you're doing. When we had the subway going on here, it's not like anybody's life was at stake, but it took 5 years to do a 2 year job, as expected. So as chairman of the neighborhood association I'm supposed to be checking on it. So every month I go over to see how things are going. You know these big digs you can only go on with a hard hat and big jobs like that all the hats are color coded, electricians in red, what not and what not, so I got a white one, for supervisors and inspectors. And I had it professionally lettered, drawn in, in gold, Lawrence, OHMFIC. Nobody knew what OHMFIC was, and nobody wanted to be on the short-end of finding out what it was. It sounds like

**Nyasha:** How do you spell that?

**Father Lawrence:** O-H-M-F-I-C. People assumed it was like OSHA or MOSHA or one of those, people answered questions for me, I don't know sir, I'll go find out sir, off to the trailer he goes to get me an answer. I had one guy who figured it out over the 5 years, laborer, blue hat, older than I am, African-American fellow, came up to me while his boss is out in the trailer, says 'Yo bro, yo, does that mean what I think it means?' 'Sure does brother, don't tell the white boys.' He gave me a five and said 'you're pretty cool for a honkey' [laughter].

**Maria:** What does it mean?

**Father Lawrence:** Now how about you two intellectual ladies can you figure out OHMFIC?

**Nyasha:** O-H-M-F-I-C?

**Maria:** It'd take me a lot longer than we have actually.

**Father Lawrence:** Office of the Head MF In Charge.

**Nyasha:** Ooooh.

**Father Lawrence:** For five years they were getting answers from a guy from the Office of the Head MF In Charge [laughter], they never figured it out.

**Nyasha:** Wow, that's creative.

**Father Lawrence:** Tweaking the beak of the bureaucracy is fun [laughter].

**Maria:** That's great, that's really funny. Any other riot stories that you can think of?

**Father Lawrence:** Oh God. More than I can think of I'm sure.

**Maria:** Because of the riots we have some questions, post-riot questions.

**Father Lawrence:** Okay, go ahead.

**Maria:** Well it's really just more just how did Baltimore as a whole change after the riots?

**Father Lawrence:** Well, it certainly accelerated the white flight that was already underway you know. Some neighborhoods never really did recover, that was essentially the end of Pennsylvania Avenue as we knew it. I mean it was already getting pretty seedy by that point, the glory days were the '40s and '50s. By the late '60s you didn't have the great clubs that the national level people played at, where people got out of the limo, walked on the carpet you know, it was a little seedier but certainly it accelerated its decline. The Gay Street thing never recovered really, they made this attempt with the

mall, then one thing and another, it's never really caught back on. It did wake a lot of people up, there were a lot of people who were able to talk about things you couldn't talk about before to people who wouldn't listen before. So you read I guess the riot commission report that came out a couple of years later? I forget the name of it but there was a national commission on the civil disturbances that published a big report I guess '69 '70 '71 or something like that and they pointed in all the obvious directions. What had led up to this and what you'd have to do if you weren't gonna go through this again and again and it accelerated the civil rights movement at the same time that it produced more geographic racial polarization. White folks moved out of integrated neighborhoods faster, but in terms legal changes, even attitudinal changes, I think things began to move faster. It's taken a long time but we're still not there. I would trace the ascent of the civil rights movement to 1948, do you know what event that was? When Harry Truman integrated the armed forces. I mean he sent a civil rights bill to congress every year. Democratic presidents had to you know but he never fought for it, because he knew it could ever win, there was no way he could break the southern filibuster in 1946 '47 '48. But the civil rights cause could be advanced by something he could do that was not subject to congressional approval. As commander in chief he simply integrated the armed forces and this is back in the day when everyone in my half of the human race had two years with Uncle Sam, if you didn't have an excuse from your undertaker you went in the army. And I don't care how you were brought up but after you spent two years being ground snapped by the same sergeant, crawling through the same mud, bitching about the same chow, you look over to the guy at the bunk next to you and say I don't care what they say, he ain't a hell of a lot different than me. And of course Brown vs. Board in '54,

the March on Washington in '63, the civil rights bill in '64, that was the best thing Jack Kennedy could have done for the civil rights movement, get killed. It was Lyndon Johnson preaching over Jack Kennedy's body and coming from the senate where he knew how to twist the arms was able to pass that bill in 1964, that Kennedy couldn't have passed if he was alive. I was involved in a demonstration for that in '64, we had a civil rights seminarians vigil in front of the Lincoln memorial 24/7, one Catholic, one Protestant, one Jewish seminarian. One of the local churches had given us their church basement as a crash pad, you know guys came in from all over the country that worked, 4 on and 8 off, 4 on and 8 off shifts for 2 days, 5 days, 10 days, whatever you could spare. Except the weekends, well the weekends at least when I was there, the relief car bringing down guys from UTS and JTS in New York broke down up on the Jersey Turnpike so relief couldn't come in. So as guys had to leave guys left and it went from 8 on to 4 off, to 4 on and 4 off, to 8 on and 4 off to on, until relieved. About 5 o'clock in the morning I told one of the guys I was gonna go to sleep, they said you can't do that we gotta stand here the whole time, I said I didn't say I wasn't gonna stand here, I said I was gonna go to sleep. So I went into the pray at rest position, put my head down on my chest and went to sleep. They said I slept for about 15 minutes till I wanted to roll over, almost fell and broke my neck [laughter]. But all of the things about that vigil too that never caught the press; about 6 o'clock every morning, a cab would pull up, this is across the street from Lincoln Memorial, you know where that is. Cab would pull up, driver would get out, 55/60 year old African American driver, walked over, set down a box, said good morning, everybody said good morning to him, walked back to his cab, got in, and drove away. Every morning 3 donuts, 3 cups of coffee, 6AM, every morning. We had a guy

from India, student tourist, wanted to know if he could take our picture, we said sure most people don't even ask, go ahead, he said 'I'm going home next month, I want my people to see that there is more to it than what they see in the papers.' The Nazis had a counter picket across the side street from us, [gestures] here's the circle in front of the memorial and we're here, and then the streets up here and here, the Nazis had a picket there. There's a car that sat here, guy read the paper for 8 hours, then somebody else pulled up behind him, guy folded up his paper and drove away, then the new guy read his paper for 8 hours [laughs], it's called undercover but not very. However at one point we found out that wasn't all there was, somebody told the Nazis we were beating up their boy, which was totally untrue, but they piled it into their truck came rolling over across the bridge. So as their truck came around and they started unloading all their battle regalia the guy reading the newspaper gets out of the car, grabs his Financial Gaze in one hand and his pistol in another, puts the pistol up in the air and says nobody moves. The ice cream truck vendor across the street did the same, and two tourists who were walking down from the Lincoln Memorial, drew weapons and moved. They had 4 people on the scene, only one of whom had we made. They didn't want anything going on at the Lincoln Memorial, FBI nobody moves.

**Maria:** Back to in Baltimore...

**Father Lawrence:** Yeah, and afterwards

**Maria:** And afterwards, what about just the neighborhood around St. Gregory's in particular, how did that change?

**Father Lawrence:** Not a whole lot because of course the Gilmore projects were the largest part of the immediate neighborhood and nobody, I mean that's decent housing, till

this day that's decent housing, those high rises needed to come down, they were terrible. But the low rise public housing, the ones that were well built at least, decent housing, in good communities things got networked. I don't know whether it's true for you because girls are socialized differently than boys but the boys in the neighborhood at St. Gregory's when I was there as a seminarian was no different than my boys in my neighborhood when I was growing up. The only reason we behaved was that our mothers were in cahoots, if Jack Dowe, Steve Single and I got in a fight, we got punished. Whichever backyard we were in that's whose mother we got punished by. It didn't matter that the Doves were Methodist, that we were Methodist, the Siegel's were Jewish, that Jack Dowe's father made more money than my father, none of that you know, these women knew each other, trusted each other and that was that. Only once did you make the mistake of going home and telling your mother that some other mother punished you cause then you got it again. Oh Betsy Single punished you, you must have done something wrong, go stand in that corner, but, go stand, yes ma'am...never made that mistake again. Same thing was happening more then although it probably still is today, I haven't been back since then or hanging out enough to notice. Liquor stores were gone, although they tended to reopen, if not those guys then some other guys, a couple of places were burnt to the ground, they were just casualties of war, some places suffered enough fire damage that they were not really inhabitable, and that's to say that that led to the decline, further decline, rapider decline, more rapid decline of Pennsylvania Avenue. The two little stores down on Fulton Avenue reopened pretty quickly. Their windows had been broken and their stuff had been taken but nobody had torched 'em. They were back in business pretty quickly.

**Nyasha:** So would you say that the church played a big role during the riots?

**Father Lawrence:** I'm sure it depends on neighborhood to neighborhood, clergyman to clergyman, but I know an awful lot of clergyman who played a pretty large role in trying to keep things civilized. Make a point very dramatically and make it without anybody getting killed.

**Maria:** And how did your life change?

**Father Lawrence:** Well I guess one thing, after you've spent 9 days doing something like that and had 4 or 5 times when people backed you up against the wall with an M-1 pointed at your head, it takes a lot more to panic you than it used to. If human life is not in immediate jeopardy I don't panic very well.

**Maria:** I bet.

**Nyasha:** And what were these instances when they put the gun to your head?

**Father Lawrence:** Basically curfew enforcement, trying to tell me I'm not supposed to be out there after 4 o'clock. Sergeant you got your orders, I got mine, you know.

**Maria:** I think that's...

**Father Lawrence:** One of the loneliest experiences I ever had was 45 minutes up in that bell tower, I think it was 42 actually, was he 42 when he died?

**Nyasha:** How old was he?

**Father Lawrence:** Probably 40 somewhere, you strike that bell once a minute, so I was up in that bell tower watching the minute, soon as it'd sweep second hand and ringing the toll, and just wondering where we were gonna go from here.

**Nyasha:** So did you foresee the riots happening after you heard about MLK's death?

**Father Lawrence:** I knew there was at least a possibility, and after Washington erupted Friday night, I knew we were going Saturday. There's no way they would have it moving in Washington and we weren't gonna follow suit. Didn't have to be planned, just anybody who was there would have known that. 25 years to the day after Dr. King was killed, we were doing a memorial mass for him, it fell on a Sunday that year, and just by coincidence there was a sax player sitting in and we programmed 'Precious Lord' cause it was Dr. King's favorite hymn and in between verses, the sax took off and wailed, I mean it was wonderful. At the kiss of peace I came up to him gave him a bear hug and said thank you for answering the man's request. He looked at me and said what? I said oh my God you didn't know. He said know what? I said I'll tell you afterwards. I don't know if this is true or not but I know this is what I heard that just before Dr. King was shot in Memphis, he came out on the balcony and there was this young sax player walking by who recognized him, stopped and waved. King waved back, pointed to his saxophone case and said Dr. King is there anything you want me to play for you? And he said yeah, would you play 'Precious Lord', play it real sweet. The kid put his case down to open it and they shot him. 25 years, to the day, by coincidence, coincidence, I had a sax player in church play 'Precious Lord'. Sometimes things just work out you know. One of my mentors, Joe Connelly dropped out of Loyola College in 1941 and enlisted in the marines. Came out of the marines in '46 as a 1<sup>st</sup> lieutenant and then decided to go into the seminary. He was pastor at St. Bernadette's when he died and as we're carrying him out to the car, there are a bunch of parishioners standing out there, one of whom just happened to be a young lance corporal of marines on leave who attended the mass in dress uniform. And I don't even think he knew Joe's background but as we walked past I



looked over at him and said mister you present arms when an officer is passing, kid snapped to, held the salute until the hearse was down the street and around the corner. 50 years later, just by coincidence, a salute from his old outfit. All kinds of interesting things happened just by coincidence.

**Maria:** Those are great stories.

**Father Lawrence:** Of course sometimes you can play at them too. I had a gal I was taking care of in the nursing home, 3 years, 4 years, thought I got to know her pretty well. She was British, she was a war bride, married her G.I. boyfriend in '46, came back with him, took up US citizenship, raised a family, got a job, what not what not, what she'd never told me, many of 'em never do, I find out from her kids at the funeral home on Sunday night, her funeral in Monday morning, prior to her marrying him and coming over here, she'd been lieutenant of WRNS, you know who WRNS were? Women's Royal Navy Service. She was in the planning staff for D-Day. So I said to her kids have you called the embassy? They said no why? I said because that's what the phrase dead of honor really means and if I know an outfit that would be proud to pay it properly it's her majesty's royal navy. They said anything you can do go ahead. 6 o' clock on a Sunday night right, so I call the British embassy. 'Good evening, British embassy may I help you?' 'Yes, I have an emergency communication for you dispatch officer, please patch me through.' 'Very good sir and I patched through. I can hear his kids in the background, so I got him at home.' So I explained and he said [in British accent] 'Well, tis a bit short notice but I'm not sure exactly what we should be able to do, but we shall certainly do what we can, thank you so much for letting us know.' So in the morning I grab the organist and say this is what I want played at the end, she says I don't know that song, I

said yes you do, it's just like this song only the tempo is different, now here's your tempo. Oh ok I can do that. Just before the funeral a full commander of her majesty's royal navy shows up from Washington in full dress uniform standing the guard of honor, he follows the casket in, takes a seat behind the family. After the mass I step down to the casket to do the blessing over the body and he steps out of the aisle and stands to with that very rigid brace attention of the British, so after the blessing I signal for the congregation to rise, nodding to the organist, and it took him the whole first line to respond. [Hums out tune to 'God Save the Queen'] Bum bum bum bum bum bum...and holds the salute for the sounding of honors, God Save the Queen that slow march, British slow march 60 counts to the minute. In absolute silence he lowers the salute at the same fundamentally glacial pace, turns around, slaps down with his left foot, and leads the procession out at slow march; could've cleaned the family up with a shovel [laughter]. Person who was more blown away than her own kids, was her best friend who had been lieutenant RAF, never thought she'd hear that tune or this little ditty again on this side of the pond, much less at half meter and honors at graveside for her best friend.

**Maria:** That's great.

**Father Lawrence:** The Brits of course know how to do it properly.

**Maria:** Alright, I think, are we all set here. Yeah.

**Nyasha:** That's it.