

But I Don't Know

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(Written during EDFN 405, The Development of Educational Thought,
as a reflection on videos from the series "Eyes On The Prize" (PBS),
documenting the Civil Rights Movement and first integration of schools.)

I like to think I would have stood with you, my brother
When you faced the angry mob at Central High that day,
That I wouldn't have turned and run in terror
From my own people –
That I would have been your friend.

I like to think I would have risked
My smug little blanket of privilege,
But I don't know.

While your eyes were on the prize,
I held the prize in my own hands
And didn't know it was there,
Until I dropped it like a hot potato –
Embarrassed by my good luck
Because I'd done nothing to earn it.

I like to think I'd do better
Because I know better
And I think right,
Which makes me live right,
So there must be no work left to do
Unless it's to make sure that you speak educated,
And don't play music that scares me,
And don't act TOO different or keep me out
Because I belong everywhere
As long as the lights are on
And I don't wake up to gunfire...

I like to think I would be strong
If I was the mother of three
With two jobs and no man
And the elevators broken and afraid of the stairs
Wishing for a safe drop from my window so I didn't have to choose
Rape or locking myself inside.

And I'd keep MY kids out of gangs, and unpregnant,
And in school, and make sure they
Took some middle-of-the-road jobs
When the real money is in the streets,
Even if it's marked with death.
Because for me, and MY family, it would be different –
But I don't know.

I'd like to think I know what's right
And that I'd say what's right
And even DO what's right,
As long as I could keep my place
And not get hurt
And not lose friends
And not have it be too hard
Or take too much time
Or get in the way of things.

I like to think it's enough to know where we stand
Without having to stand up
White face to white face
Protecting those who've just plain damn suffered enough
So they could take a rest and breathe a little easy.

I don't know a lot of things,
Like what makes a person stand in front of a school door
And say "no, not you!" to a child eager to learn?
What makes me want to run far away and say,
"He's not one of me?"

And what makes a person set fire to a church
With little girls inside,
And then go home to his own little girls
And eat supper without a thought?
And maybe he would have been at MY house
For dinner that night,
Me not knowing what he'd done –
But somehow thinking later I should have.

What makes a person hang a man
In a tree for nothing
More than being in the same town?
And what would make me stop it
All of those men in hoods,
Fire in the dark,
Me just one little scared female
Knowing it wasn't MY fault
But somehow thinking it was after all.

White people DO know what slavery is,
Standing in our own chains
The fear bubbling up when we think too much
And pretend it's not our problem.

I like to think I would have broken the chains
For both of us.
But I don't know.
And I wonder how you can trust me – ever.