

James Baldwin, Stan Weir, and Socialism

May 3, 2017



Raoul Peck's powerful documentary "I Am Not Your Negro," which was nominated for an Academy Award, has brought the great writer James Baldwin (1924-1987) to a new generation of Americans who may have been unfamiliar with Baldwin's life and writings. "I Am Not Your Negro" presented Baldwin as a powerful voice of the black liberation movement, but hardly mentioned his longtime commitment not only to full equality for black Americans, but also to socialism.

Baldwin wrote in *No Name in the Street* that he had been a "convinced fellow traveler" at 13 who had marched in the May Day parade and then became a "Trotskyite" by age nineteen. Too young to have been involved in Harlem's Communist Party in the 1930s, he claimed to have been a member of the Young People's Socialist League, but that has never been confirmed.

In the 1940s in New York City, Baldwin moved in both racially integrated bohemian intellectual circles and in the sphere of the Trotskyists, then in the process of dividing between supporters and opponents of the Soviet Union. The opponents called themselves "Third Camp socialists," that is, opponents of both capitalism and Stalinist Communism. Baldwin leaned toward the Third Camp socialists, influenced by his friend Stan Weir, a member of the Workers Party (WP) and later of the Independent Socialist League (ISL).

Baldwin declined to join these organizations perhaps because he was gay. Those organizations did not expel gays, as the Communist Party and the Socialist Workers Party did, supposedly because they feared that the police could blackmail gay members, but also because the Soviet Union was hostile to homosexuality. Still the WP and the ISL did not recognize and deal openly with the issue of homosexuality. Baldwin apparently felt his homosexuality would make it difficult for him to be completely accepted and to participate fully in the socialist movement of that era. (See *New Politics'* two part symposium on "Gays and the Left.") Still, his exposure to the Trotskyists and the Third Camp had a tremendous influence on Baldwin as it did on the New York intellectuals in general.



While many people know James Baldwin, fewer know Stan Weir (1921-2001), a long time leftist, labor activist, and worker-intellectual. Weir, a member of the WP, then the ISL, and later the International Socialists (IS), worked as a seaman, a stevedore, in factories, and as a construction worker. Later in his life he taught labor studies at the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana and wrote essays about workplace organizing, many of which were collected in his book *Single Jack Solidarity* (2004). Weir's life was fictionalized in Harvey Swados' novel *Standing Fast* (1970). Baldwin and Weir, perhaps only at the Calypso in lower Manhattan could two such men have met and become friends.

We present here an article by Stan Weir, together with a letter from James Baldwin, that discusses the cultural and political milieu in which both lived and worked from the 1940s to the 1960s. The article originally appeared in *Against the Current* 18 (1989). A fuller discussion of Baldwin's politics can be found in Douglas Field, "James Baldwin's Life on the Left: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young New York Intellectual," *ELH*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (Winter 2011), pp. 833-862.

These are Stan Weir's words:

It is possible that some of the most creative and nurturing relationships being formed at any given moment in the life of a society are those grasped by young people newly "out on their own" and about to leave early youth behind, but who are not yet into the main competition. It is also fortunate, though rare, if over the following years they are allowed to meet again and so co-witness for their generation.

James Baldwin and I came to Manhattan's Greenwich Village by separate ways early in the third year of World War II. He was eighteen, but knew that there was no other life for him than that of a writer. I was twenty-two, a merchant seaman temporarily ashore. We were introduced by Connie Williams, a Trinidadian restaurateur who was about to open her new cafe, The Calypso. She had recently told her friend and wellknown artist Buford Delaney that she needed a waiter and to send her anyone he thought would be good. Delaney sent Baldwin.

During the same week, I rented an apartment a few doors from The Calypso with artist Marjorie O'Brien and Mark Sharron, a former shipmate. MacDougal Street was at near center of what was still a genuine Bohemia. Even chance encounters brought excitement. As I left the apartment early one morning, the door to the next apartment was open. Oil paintings stacked on edge covered the entire floor space except for a narrow path. It led to an easel covered with multi-colored droppings. In the path was a sleeping red-bearded man. He was wearing a long black overcoat, also with many droppings. A card tacked on the door said "Jack Probast." We became friends. Even at later uptown exhibitions, I never saw him in any other garb.

I went outside and walked toward Fourth Street. A sign in a window announced The Calypso's opening. The door was ajar. Connie greeted me as I entered, "We don't open until Friday, dear, but sit down and let me fix you something." We became friends while I ate a large breakfast.

I spent the day at the hiring hall of the Sailors' Union of the Pacific (SUP) deep downtown on Broad Street. It had been located there to recrew West Coast ships then sailing the Atlantic. When I returned to The Calypso in the late afternoon Connie greeted me with the announcement that I was to be a temporary dishwasher and that her waiter, Jimmy, and I were special boarders. Then she introduced us. A unique yet natural adoption process had been set in motion.

At first, Baldwin was shy, but we soon had long discussions. It was not just the talk and the good food that quickly laid the basis for our friendship. The Calypso was catching on fast with a unique segment of the public, especially among radical intellectuals. C. L. R. James, for example, sometimes brought Pan-Africanists. Buford Delaney attracted the Henry Miller crowd, and then there were the dancers, musicians, actors, and singers from the equivalent of what are now the off-off-Broadway shows. Many were West Indians carrying well-developed political attitudes.

A common bond among many of these regulars was the feeling that the heads of state in both Russia and the United States were incapable of leading the world to more personal freedom and were themselves part of the problem. It is improbable that there were many other places in New York at that time where people were genuinely entertaining each other in this way, and as an extension of their enjoyment, discussing politics.

Neither Baldwin nor I had ever before been with people who shared their artistic and social talents so generously, almost as regular ritual. We joined the discussions and after-hours parties—both as equals and awed apprentices. He had grown up in nearby Harlem hampered by narrow opportunity to socialize with people of his own age. Until 1940, I had spent my entire life in East Los Angeles, a product of the big band era. The distances we had traveled to arrive at Connie's were close to equal.

Life in the Village was as stimulating for him as for me. Just as important, this was the first time either of us had ever been allowed extended face-to-face access to a person of "the opposite race" and the same generation.

One mid-afternoon coffee break, Baldwin talked about what he felt was the work he could do best. He wanted to help make it possible for white as well as Black Americans to witness the Black Experience—and the white experience—as part of the same societal process. After we had talked of this for a while, I asked what he felt was one of the most important things for a white to learn about the history of racial conflict in our country. He countered that I would first have to give him some actual racial experience in my life. I told him about Willie Slayton.

The Slaytons were the first Black family with school-aged children to move into our part of town. Their son Willie entered Garfield High School in 1938. Teachers mentioned that he was the first. No matter that he became one of the school's football greats, his daily presence created openings for change. We all knew that somewhere there were millions of Black Americans. We had seen some of them from a distance. The streetcar that took us downtown passed through the wholesale produce market area where most Black Angelenos then lived. Willie Slayton made them more real. Going to a Stepin Fetchit movie or noticing the price of what we were taught to call "Nigger Toes" (Brazil nuts) in the markets was no longer an unnoticed experience. We got insight that the adult world had more than one kind of war in progress. For the first time the environment was demanding that we think in colors other than white.

"We have had to do the same thing almost from birth for over three hundred years," Baldwin replied

when I had finished, "but from the other way around. And I suspect that, for us, the effort has been much more difficult. As people doing the lowest work, we have always had to think about this country in its racial totality, especially when determining our goals. Still, deep down, we have always known that we can't make it alone, and we have to make alliances. There are terrible segregations on the job everywhere. At the same time, when you look at the total production process in our nation, the people doing the work are so racially interwoven that it is impossible to unravel us without exposing how we are actually governed.

Days later Baldwin told me that there had been, for him, an element of positive surprise in my story of the Slaytons. His admission freed me to talk about the segregation in my union. I explained that members of the Sailors' Union had heroically fought scabs, police, and the military during the 1930s, in order to take control of the hiring process and then attain other conditions of dignity. Baldwin listened intently and let it go at that.

The subject did not come up again until a late-night party which had developed at The Calypso around a visiting Afro-Cuban band. I was dancing with a woman who was enjoying her first visit to Connie's place. We talked easily, but then I noticed she had stiffened and was staring at the lapel of my jacket. Suddenly she broke away pointing and yelling, "This man is a member of the SUP, the racist Trotskyist union run by Lundeberg's goons."

Few who heard had any idea as to what she was referring to, what a goon was, or could identify Harry Lundeberg. Baldwin spared me the need to retaliate. He came out of the kitchen and took a seat nearby. She noticed him, assumed she had an ally, and again took up her attack. "How can anyone be in such a union when they could belong to a progressive union like the NMU [National Maritime Union]?"

Baldwin did not raise his voice. He made direct eye contact with her and explained that anyone accused of Trotskyism was not tolerated in the NMU. But no matter, if racism had indeed been eliminated from the NMU, "then that man you were just dancing with can best serve my people where he is."

I soon got a ship that would make a short North Atlantic run and return to New York only a few months later. It was during this stay ashore that, without asking directly, I nevertheless asked Baldwin to join my radical group, the Workers Party (later the Independent Socialist League). He already knew that it was the product of a split with orthodox Trotskyism and with Trotsky, but he paused longer than usual before tackling a difficult subject. "None of your Shachtmanites, if you will, have ever patronized me. You know that, like you, I do not like this war; you know I agree with you that after all the destruction and death it will probably end with more, not fewer dictatorships in this world. And I agree with you on much more, but what you are really asking of me is impossible. It took you months to become fully aware that I develop relationships that include what is sexual with men. It would have taken you longer if it were not for the presence of a sophisticated Black woman like Catherine Shipley, born and raised right here in the Village. The two of you left here last night after you and I had finished eating together. I saw it happen. She told you without alarm, just out there before you reached the corner. You had known it, and did not know it, because you had buried it. Yes, homosexual is a hard word to accept. You knew instantly that what she said was true. You did not turn on me, but you buried it still another time."

He was being kind and so more effectively judgmental. I had been making him invisible. He waved to plead that I should not interrupt and went on.

"I know that your group does not expel those who join and are then 'discovered' after the fact. But like you, they attempt to ignore this human difference. That it is a matter which cannot be discussed

means that the discussion of every subject leads always to that closed door.

"And there is more. There are no active novelist artists among you. They are there in body, but have become silent, stunted. This makes me know that something exists unseen, that there are other unadmitted denials."

Anger had arisen in what he said, but not rejection. I had forced him to do something out of harmony with his style—to make ideology totally specific.

Sometime in the months that followed, I went back to using San Francisco as home port. The war had begun to grind down and the changes it had made were more visible. At the beginning of the war the San Francisco longshore local of the International Longshoremen's and Warehousemen's Union had only a few dozen Afro-Americans in its membership; by the third year they constituted a majority. Men of European origin had been a minority in the Marine Cooks and Stewards (MC&S) for many years. The Marine Firemen, Oilers, Watertenders and Wipers (MFOW) and the SUP both had Hawaiians, Samoans, Cape Verde Islanders, and Brazilians among their members, but so far as was known neither union had one descendant of an American slave.

I was ashore in 1945 when the Coast Committee of the Sailors' Union developed its position paper on the "problem" caused by the large number of Black men who had recently taken permanent jobs in the West Coast maritime industry. The paper was ready for membership ratification or non-approval at a regular Monday night meeting. It complained that the leadership of the "Communist-influenced" unions on the waterfront were flooding their memberships with Black men in order to develop automatic yes votes for their union policies. (The statement obviously referred to the ILWU and Marine Cooks. The NMU had no West Coast ships under contract.) But the "checkerboarding" of ships' crews with Black and white seamen, said the paper, caused racial friction and so was not acceptable to the SUP. The presentation of the report concluded with the claim that regardless of its racial restriction, the SUP was still a democratic union because it promised that the day the membership came to favor checkerboarding, the official leadership would go along.

I was the first speaker to go to the microphone. I argued that the report "solves nothing" and so "the crisis will continue." I explained it was true that the SUP had conditions that were contractually superior to those on NMU ships, but there were no Black seamen who could hear that as long as we excluded them. I concluded with the claim that the Coast Committee's policy was a gift to the very "Communist leaders" they were so worried about. The chairman of the meeting was Morris Weisberger. He later succeeded Harry Lundeberg as top officer of the SUP. Lundeberg stood speechless at his separate and personal podium. Weisberger shouted, "And what would you have done, Brother Weir, if you had been on the Coast Committee?" With that, he stopped short, brought down his gavel, declared the section of the report passed and moved the agenda without a vote. He had realized in mid-sentence, it appeared, that his question gave me the opportunity to speak a second time.

There were out-of-order responses from the audience both before and after I had spoken. Those that came after were different and less racist. A drunken member who had stood immediately after the report was finished to inform all "that the day a nigger comes into this union I'll tear up my membership book," got up again when I had finished speaking to say, "Ah, I'll just take out a withdrawal card."

I interpreted the above incident as a measure of the change that had probably taken place in a large section of the entire audience membership. But the union's racism was now official, and the officials had won too easily. After the victories which established the union in the early 1930s, the rank and file had failed to prepare against two traps: failure to share what had been won with all, failure to

make the maximum preparations against the formation of a bureaucracy.

Later that night I phoned Baldwin and described the meeting. I was down. The solidarity subculture that the older SUP men had built in the early 1930s had been a source of strength for me. Now it was a historical lesson. But Baldwin had not expected much. He was less despairing, even a little jubilant. Certainly it would have been better, he said, if more had been accomplished, but the matter had not come and gone in silence, "at least witnesses have been created."

I had almost totally lost contact with Baldwin until a chance meeting months after the war was over, and just hours before he left on his first trip to Europe. Suddenly we were face to face crossing Sixth Avenue at Third Street. We talked briefly on the corner out of traffic. We couldn't talk too long, he had to finish packing.

Yes, he had gotten the Saxton Fellowship to go to France and finish writing *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. A new part of his life was beginning and he was brimming with enthusiasm. I did not have a lot to say, except that I was working on the Chevrolet assembly line in East Oakland and had recently gotten married.

Baldwin saw I was a little down politically and noticed my need to talk. He put aside his efforts to quickly end our chance meeting. We talked briefly but without hurry and said good-bye. I walked to Sheridan Square, reminded of my former shipmate who had been expelled from the Workers Party on charges brought by the Political Committee. Mark Sharron had gone to Europe to do some writing in 1946, "without party permission." It was the kind of tough discipline that came from the opposite of conviction.

In 1959, *Esquire* magazine sponsored a joint tour by Baldwin, who had just returned to the States after eleven years in Europe, Philip Roth, and, as I recall, John Cheever. The trio made appearances at three Bay Area universities. After Stanford and Berkeley, Baldwin's turn as featured speaker came at San Francisco State. My wife Mary and I attended. Baldwin came home with us to Berkeley, and stayed overnight so that we might catch up.

I had recently become a full-time longshoreman with B registered status along with over seven hundred others. On the second day of his visit, Baldwin accompanied me to the union hiring hall just before dawn. I introduced him around. He was impressed that more than half of the men were Black. At least a dozen of us did not take jobs that day. Instead we took Baldwin to Manjo's, a nearby waterfront cafe. A few faces in the crowd around the big table at Manjo's changed from time to time, but at no time were there fewer than fifteen, until we broke it up in midafternoon. This good experience for all the participants did not go unreported to those with power in the industry.

Because of policies initiated by ILWU president Harry Bridges and the employers, we "B" men were not allowed membership in the union. Our disenfranchised section of the work force had elected me as a representative. Without anyone knowing it, Baldwin's involvement in a twenty-year battle by rank and file dockers against the maritime establishment had begun. He left town in high spirits, though not talkative. To add measure to the time, he picked off the shelf our copy of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and on the inside cover wrote, "It is good when survivors meet."

Connie Williams held a party for James Baldwin on May 20, 1963, at her then-famous San Francisco restaurant on Fillmore Street. It was a celebration of more than just old times. Since 1959, Baldwin had become a literary star, world class. He was in town this time, I believe, making a documentary film which featured the residents of San Francisco's waterfront view of the ghetto at Hunter's Point and the ILWU.

Connie's Restaurant was closed to the public that night. About a dozen old friends were present. Baldwin arrived very late. He had been drinking hard and was exhausted. A retinue of about ten men and women followed him in, including a white man introduced as his "representative." They kept their party intact. The representative was equipped with records "that Jimmy likes to hear." Connie selected and played Mahalia Jackson's "Didn't It Rain?"

The representative rose from his chair clapping in what was obviously his rendition of Black religious ecstasy. A contingent of CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) activists came in. Several latecomers had phoned friends. The restaurant quickly filled to capacity.

I had to be at the hiring hall early the next morning and interrupted several conversations to say good-bye to Baldwin. He got up protesting, "But we were going to talk. I want to hear what has been happening with the men on the docks." I said we could do a bit of it right then if he had five minutes. We went into the kitchen for privacy.

I explained that Harry Bridges was offering the "A" men or union members of Local to a chance to get most of the "B" men into the union, if only the "A" men would let him fire about one hundred of the "B" men that he considered "bad eggs." He would not reveal the identities of the "troublemakers" he had targeted. I felt it was all but certain that I was among the number.

When I had finished Baldwin said, "Will you do something, Stan? I can't begin to absorb this right now. It's impossible to explain. I apologize. I am leaving for New York in the morning, write me all this, just two pages, right away."

The next day I outlined what I then knew about what would three weeks later develop into a mass firing. Some of that information is contained in a letter from Baldwin to Coretta King, and in an article he wrote for *Muhammad Speaks*.

I received a note from Baldwin a week later. It read, "Dear Stan: In haste. Have not been well. Apology to the men follows at once, and a more detailed accounting to you. I hope this letter is all right. Jim." Enclosed was a copy of a letter he had written to Harry Bridges on my behalf. It read:

Dear Mr. Bridges, I am writing this letter because I have been a friend of Stan Weir's for nearly twenty years, and I know him to be incapable of dishonesty. This is an enormous statement: but it is impossible to know a man as long as I have known Stan without recognizing the man's essential quality. If he is anti-progressive and anti-labor, then I am a dues-paying member of the Birch society.

We know each other from very far back—I was a waiter. He is not much older than I am now. but when I was a kid, the three or four years difference in our ages made an enormous difference, and I used him as a kind of moral model, a kind of moral older brother. He has never betrayed me, in any way whatever, and he is one of the people I have in mind when I write, when I speak—it comforts me to know that he is in the world. I beg you, do not betray him. Good men are rare.

Very Sincerely,
James Baldwin
June 28, 1963

Baldwin's letter to Bridges must have arrived at the headquarters of the ILWU on the same day that I received my copy. I got a phone call that evening from a longtime longshoreman. He told me that photocopies of Baldwin's letter had circulated among the headquarters' staff of the ILWU and was received with enthusiastic support by many. The man reporting to me concluded with, "You've got

him now. With Baldwin's letter he will never be able to carry out his plan to fire you."

My observations of Bridges during the previous years made me know that he would not relent. I did not pose a threat to him, but the survival instinct of total bureaucrats makes them know that they must stamp out any and every potential opposition. The only force that could save us was the membership of the union. If they were unable to sustain their support, we would experience what in terms of the job is capital punishment.

Eighty-two B longshoremen were fired in June 1963, after secret trial in an action openly directed by Bridges. I was one of them. No charges were given, but we were each asked to write a defense, stating why we believed we were innocent. We refused and demanded to be heard. Fake due process was arranged. We were given a first-and-last appeal hearing presided over by the same men who had fired us. ILWU Local 10 officials and members fought again to save us and failed. Rather than accept injustice in silence and submission, we took our last opportunity to resist by going to the Federal courts.

James Baldwin returned to the United States from a European trip in 1969. He immediately joined the Longshore Jobs Defense Committee that we had formed to raise money for legal expenses. Over 90 percent of the plaintiffs were Black men. Few of us ever regained the earning power we had known as dockers. We carried the main financial responsibility, but it was impossible for us to do it all when resourced mainly by unemployment insurance and minimum wages.

Our ability to raise money nationally was enhanced in 1967. I had taken a job on the Labor Education faculty of the University of Illinois and was regularly meeting publicly prominent people with experience in fundraising. There were other benefits too. In 1969 the Miller Lecture Series of the University booked several prominent Black intellectuals to speak on the Champaign-Urbana campus. Baldwin was one of them. His turn came toward the end of the series.

At least two hundred Black students and young citizens from segregated North Urbana arrived early. They took the first four rows of seats. An hour later a mainly white audience filled the rest of the auditorium. During all previous lectures in the series the young Black front row audience had not allowed questions to come from the whites to their rear. Baldwin had heard and had understood. Without any reproach he made it clear that no one at that meeting would be denied voice.

When he had concluded his main presentation the third person recognized from the floor was a young white woman in the front row balcony. "Mr. Baldwin, would you respond to the attack made on you by Eldridge Cleaver in *Soul on Ice*?" I heard someone whisper, "My God, that's the part where Cleaver used Baldwin to attack the idea that homosexuality could be an alternative solution to the problems of Black males in this country." Baldwin had the advantage of total silence. "I'm not going to pretend I like what he said. Nobody likes that kind of an attack, but he was using me to make a point, and take me out of it, he was right."

A gasp from every section of the audience demonstrated instant realization that we were all in the presence of an unusual integrity, someone who could attain objectivity sooner than most, the first prerequisite of leadership. Some wiped their eyes without embarrassment. By integrating ends and means he had given evidence of a greater human potential, and for a time, had integrated the meeting.

Mary and I were in the last row balcony. We had a reunion with Baldwin the next day. He had talked late into the previous night to Black graduate students about "the fight in longshore." The visit was short. When we walked across the tarmac to the plane for New York, we embraced at good-bye, able to show physical affection for the first time. Helped by the change that had spread with the student

rebellions of the '60s, we had both shed some fears.

As soon as I returned from the airport I phoned Harvey Swados (1922- 1971), novelist and reporter on labor and race conflicts. He had created a distance between himself and the Shachtmanites in the early 1940s in order to devote himself to writing. I knew he was right then writing an article on Eldridge Cleaver for the *New York Times Magazine*. "Yes," he would like the story in his piece for the *Times*. Minutes later, I phoned Baldwin in New York to get his formal permission.

"What did I say?"

I repeated the question from the young woman in the balcony and his answer.

"Yes. That is the way I would have said it. Of course, give it to Harvey."

Swados placed the bit in the middle of his article, which appeared late that summer. Months later, Burgess Meredith, who was directing Baldwin's play *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, came up to Swados at a party: "That cameo of Jimmy in your article on Cleaver. It revealed the essence of the man better than anything I've read."

It was in the weeks after Baldwin's speech at the University of Illinois that he wrote Coretta King on behalf of the fired San Francisco dockers. At the same time he wrote an article in support of the case which was finally published in the Black Muslim paper, *Muhammad Speaks*. Both of these writings and the letter of explanation to me from Istanbul on August 7, 1969, also reproduced here, make clear the constant presence of near exhaustion in Baldwin's life after achievement of fame.

Beyond the tensions imposed on Baldwin by career, add the effects of racism and sexism on his personal life, a social conscience that demanded he be available to every movement against injustice, and a sense of personal loyalty to friends, and then it becomes possible to see how impossible were demands on Baldwin's health.

A Promethean spirit cannot forever overcome the limitations of a frail physique. But then during a phone call in late November 1976, it was clear that Baldwin would forever drive himself when he felt there was good cause: "Buford Delaney is in a madhouse in Paris. We are getting older, but he is seventy-six. In effect, the French government owns all his paintings. I went broke trying to get them out. When I return now I must take it up once more. I did get an apartment and put all the rest of his things in it. It's too painful for me to say any more."

Mary and I crashed a publisher breakfast to hear Baldwin speak during the 1979 Convention of American Booksellers Association in Los Angeles. He sighted us and arranged that we sit at his table. Several agents were competing for his time. A waitress came and Baldwin would only order a double [Johnny Walker] Black Label. We arranged to meet the next day so that again, we might catch up.

Baldwin came down from his room to the lobby of the Bonaventure Hotel with three aspiring Black writers. The penthouse luncheon area was closing, but was kept open for our party only. Waiters were assigned to hover behind us. Baldwin and I were unable to talk so we drank together. When it was time for me to leave, he walked me to the elevator explaining, "I seldom get time for these young writers who must carry on the effort. Too much of the time I am surrounded by business people who have no idea who I am, but I can't as yet extract myself."

A year later, Baldwin and I were both in the Bay Area, I was there to raise funds so that our then sixteen-year-old longshore lawsuit might get reviewed by the Supreme Court. He was there to support a campaign for the improvement of life for prison populations. We made plans for him to

meet with us, the surviving plaintiffs he had long championed. At the last minute he couldn't keep the date. There was a note on the screen door of the apartment where he was staying. His hosts had taken him away to a meeting about which they had not informed him in advance.

I wrote Baldwin a letter after he collapsed on the way to teach one day in 1983. We talked on the phone several months later and once again before he died of stomach cancer on December 1, 1987. But we never saw each other again after our Black Label drinking ceremony atop the Bonaventure.

Death doesn't end relationships. The living keep on talking to friends who have passed and continue to get insights from them long after the obituaries. I was recently visited by another friend and writer, Ron Greenspun. He did not know that I was involved in this writing and had come to share an insight in a quote from a work on psychology: "the occurrence of an event is not the same thing as knowing what it is that one has lived through."

The conscious effort to achieve that kind of knowing brought the quality of greatness to Baldwin long before he was published, or waiting on tables.

Letter from James Baldwin to Stan Weir, August 7, 1969

Dear Stan,

I finally got the King letter out, and I wired you to that effect yesterday. I sent my letter special delivery to my sister, for I had left Coretta's address on my desk in New York. I left New York that abruptly. You must forgive me for my terrible delay, which I can hardly explain—exhaustion hit me like a hammer, and knocked me down. I can scarcely put it any other way, for, though I was, as it seemed, somewhat ill—first the stomach, then the eyes—I never really believed that any of it was physical, really. I think I simply panicked, or in effect, fainted. I'm Puritanical enough to be very ashamed of this, but perhaps I had something to learn.

I know that when I came back East, I immediately spent I don't know how long now, from early morning until late at night, in the corridors and court rooms of the Tombs, trying to help a friend fight for his life. I lost that battle, at least for the moment, that is, he's still in jail; and I had to calculate how to begin the battle, which has already taken nearly two years and far more money than I can afford again. There may be sermons in stones, etc., but there are certainly terrible witnesses in those halls: by watching the visitors, you know who's in jail. Enough.

There's also the Huey Newton business. And I've been asked, by the Biafrans, to go to Biafra, to write about it, and somehow define it to the world. This caused, as you can imagine, a very perceptible rise in the level of consternation with which my poor family has had to live, in regard to myself, for so long and led me into a veritable thicket of unanswerable questions. And I kept thinking of my friend in the Tombs, and of the DA who asked me to persuade him to plead guilty, and then, since he's already been in prison nearly two years—without trial—after a year or so they'd let him go. Honor, as it were, among thieves.

But Tony had already turned down the bargain, which, in any case, I could never possibly advise him to accept. The offer seemed—it was—so confident and brazen, and the morality which produced it so pervasive, that every human effort began to seem to me to be unutterably futile and all of my own effort mere doomed pretension: who am I, after all, and who do you think you're kidding, baby? Those big boys are playing for keeps, and nobody's life means anything to them, and you can never win.

That was why I left and why I left so abruptly. Thank God, I'm a writer, for I had to realize, as a writer, that I had reached the most dangerous possible level of demoralization—for, once you can say, why bother, you are free to become wicked. And I'm already wicked and blind enough.

I don't know Stan, the older I get, nearly as much about myself or the world as I did when I was young, and I don't know why it isn't possible to leave things as they are. I hope I'm not complaining, but God knows I've never dreamed of finding myself in such a place: and all that strengthens me finally, is my own arbitrary decision that I don't after all, really have to know that. I have to trust that.

Of course, what paralyzes one in a crisis is the terrible wedding between one's private confusions, anguishes, joys—keep the wound open, Kafka warns—and one's public role: one feels like a drunken surgeon, confronting the most important operation of his life. But if I can't write, then I can do nothing whatever, and I'm pregnant with a book and I had to come away to listen to it kick in me, and live with that most particular terror and attention, to submit myself, again, to life. And also to make money to fight those various trials.

I meant to write an open apology to the men, but, in my present state, that strikes me, simply, as being the most insufferable presumption. Please convey to them something of my situation, and my very genuine regret. I also promised you a short statement which you could use publicly, and I now belatedly realize that Coretta's letter is now Coretta's property, and you may not be able to quote from that. And I don't know what to say, I am terribly weary of slogans and battle cries. Public as I am, my commitment becomes nevertheless, more and more private, more and more a matter of the most precise articulation. So, you must simply let me off that particular hook—you have my name, and you have my word.

Take care and keep in touch,

Jimmy B, Arifi Pasa Korusu, Nazil Ap.i4 (D-i), Bebek, Istanbul, Turkey 