EDWARD M. KENNEDY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES STERLING YOUNG

October 16, 2009
Charlottesville, Virginia

Interviewer
Lee Fentress

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TRANSCRIPT

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Young: This is no longer the interview with Lee Fentress on October 16th in Charlottesville, but it's turning into an interview of Jim Young by Lee Fentress.

Fentress: Under much duress by the respondent, but by my persuasion, he has agreed, with great reticence, to just discuss a little bit of the six-and-a-half years, or five-and-a-half, that we've been working on this project.

Young: Five-and-a-half years.

Fentress: And Jim's introduction to the Senator, what he knew about him before, and how this all evolved professionally, how the initial interviews went, how they've moved on, and how they through the years progressed. Perhaps, if you would share—I think it would be valuable—your perception of the Senator as a statesman, as a person, as a family man and all that, how your instincts and sense of the man possibly evolved over that period of time.

Young: Well, this is going to be a short interview; I have a lot more to say than I could summon in a short time. The oral history got off on the right foot. It was the time for the Senator to do it, and that was by his decision. It was certainly the time in my career when I had the time to do it and wanted to do it. It got off on the right foot in part because the way we do oral history was known to the Senator. He understood it, and we were on the same wavelength about how this would be conducted and what the objective was.

The objective was to give future generations the benefit of the knowledge and experience that he had acquired over the years, and in this way give future generations a sense of not only who this towering figure was as a man and as a person, but how the history played out as he saw it and shaped it over an extraordinary period of time in the Senate. This is a one-of-a-kind oral history.

I decided to start out the interviews with him. He was the first to be interviewed after the project was launched, and I don't think that was accidental. I think he wanted to start. We decided to begin by starting out where he started out in life. To tell you the truth, I was dreading starting out with health care or immigration or something, and I really didn't know how this would be received, but I felt that was the easiest and the best way, and there was a certain logic to it. So it was growing up and his later life before he went into the Senate. I think he was somewhat surprised, but he was very serious, going back to his earliest memories.

I didn't have a whole list of questions to ask, but I asked: What are your earliest memories? He got started on that, and in a very curious way he started telling a lot of stories from his childhood and his memories about his experiences and coming back, living in New York. He got into his early schooling and the interview went quite well. We didn't know each other at all. I think we both felt that this was a safe and a good thing to talk about, knowing that the big stuff was to come later.

We were going to have a two-day interview, and the second day I went there and he called me over to his desk in his Senate office and said, "You might be interested in this." There were some old schoolbooks of his, and I could tell by the scent that they had been in an attic or a basement somewhere. They were his workbooks. They had his papers, his exams from when he was a very young boy. And I said, "Yes, this is very interesting." He said, "You see, this is what I was trying to do, this is what the question was." And then he flipped over to the next page and I could see this struggling handwriting and all of this. He was going through the book and was telling me a little bit about this. Then he came to a fairly lengthy—a page-and-a-half of writing—of a test that he had been given. I saw the teacher's grade up at the top and I said, "Well, you did well on that one, you got an E." He said, "Oh, no. Oh, no. E is next to F." [*laughter*]

Fentress: There you go.

Young: So he went through a little bit more and then he said, "This is a story I wrote." I started reading it, and it was a story about a boy at school who was very sad and who didn't like it at school. He was just so sad and he wanted to run away, and he got his little bag together and tried to run away. They caught him and all the things in his bag spilled off and rolled down the hill. So then we were beginning the interview.

Fentress: That's marvelous. Of course the little boy is him, correct?

Young: Yes. I didn't know that, but I wondered. I was so astonished; I was prepared to talk—

Fentress: It is very personal, the first interview.

Young: Yes, very early.

Fentress: Showing you these papers.

Young: Yes. It took me a while to absorb that message, and then to see what he was telling me about himself. Maybe it was a test, I don't know, trusting me with something that was very personal, but it wasn't treated as something about himself. This was something that I guess might be, and I didn't want to ask him. I was too gingerly about it at the time, but it turned out to be a very good way to start. I had my doubts as to whether we'd do this, because it allowed him to start talking about his family and his father. That's the way we got started into it. He became very anxious at some point. He said, "Well, now you know; we've got to get to the issues here. We've got to get to the issues."

Fentress: Yes.

Young: And just every time I'd see him, he'd say, "Are we going to get to—?"

Fentress: We're going to move this along.

Young: Move this along. We've got to get to the issues. And I said, "Well, OK, but I have a couple of things I'd like to do first. I'd like to get you into law school and into the Senate—"

Fentress: Before we get into the middle of a hearing.

Young: Yes. Well? "Fine, fine." So the law school, and there were always good stories, then we got into the campaign for the Senate, and that he really loved. That was very good, full of stories about that. But then we did have to get to the issues, and on this what I saw was he didn't really have to work, I think, and there weren't many briefing books about his early childhood, so it started off without heavy briefing materials, but as soon as it got beyond the campaign, he did an enormous amount.

Milton Gwirtzman would help him get briefed. Milton would produce the story and then all the backup about the issues, and that was the most challenging, really, time in the project, because he worked so hard at it and I saw how important it was for him to be prepared. And I knew that what I was seeing was the Senator being prepared and not wanting to have to say, "I don't know" or "I don't remember," which he was able to say later on, after we got over this. It was a real challenge for me, because the depth and complexity of some of these issues, like immigration, to go through the years, not to speak of health care.

The Judiciary Committee business was more straightforward and easier, but the thing was, he had to get it all in, and I began to see that we were never going to finish this up if we went into this amount of detail, and furthermore, there was a problem here, that he was talking beyond his memory. He was talking about past events, "blow-by-blow," I called it, accounts of things he had read about in the briefing book, but it was as though he was not talking from his own memory. So the challenge then became with him to get him to talk from his memory, and this meant to get him to look at me and engage with me, rather than have the briefing book. That happened. It was a long haul.

Fentress: But it didn't happen immediately.

Young: No, it did not happen immediately. Then the briefing books began to be more systematized and there was a regular procedure, and I thought I'd see my whole life as reading briefing books. So I talked with Vicki [Reggie Kennedy] about this and we both agreed. I said to her that people are going to understand that he's reading from something when they hear the oral history if he does a lot of this, though he was very good at it. But fortunately he would pause sometimes in this, and I would get in a question that had little to do with what he'd been talking about. I'd say, "Did you do this?" And so forth. He said yes. He said, "Actually, that's rather interesting." I said, "Well, tell me about it." It was a diversion. The book is let alone, he starts talking. So this is the way he came to understand, as a conversationalist, that he didn't have to tell everything. He didn't have to go blow-by-blow with everything. Most of it was going to be on the record anyway. Health care, immigration, is going to be heavily documented.

I told him one time after the interview, "You know, at this rate, we're going to be going on for a long time, and I've got to tell you I've got a few years on you." [*laughter*] Which was kind of a shock to him, I think. Anyway, this was part of the evolution of him getting to see oral history

more nearly for what it was, that it wasn't everything but it's what stands out in his memory that's important, it's not everything that happened. The best way into that was when he would remember a scene, an episode, a person or an event related to that issue or something. That's what made it easier and that's what made it really good oral history.

Fentress: It would have been interesting, in a sense, just looking back, had he started this project years ago, because he often would go on *Meet the Press* and you would see him—the rote—speaking and so forth, and it was from briefings.

Young: From memorization.

Fentress: And getting the five points out on a question; he had five points for each question that you wanted to ask.

Young: That's right. That was a next stage in it, and as we went along I would comment to him after the interview was over. I would say, "You know, I thought it was really interesting what you had to say about this." Or "The story you told is a wonderful story and it tells people a lot." I would do the quarterbacking, sort of, in the interview with him, and I was always careful to point out the things that were really good and say, "We ought to do a little more of this," and he would listen.

I remember at one point I said, "You really had fun in this one, didn't you?" "Well," he said, "I suppose so." I said, "I'm not grading you. This is not an exam, and I'm not grading you." [*laughter*]

Fentress: It was always, "But I can do better. I have a sense that I can do better."

Young: Yes, I can do better. Once my heart got into the project, in addition to my mind being involved, I talked to him about the importance—I did this fairly early on—the importance of letting himself show his person and his personal life. I said, "I don't mean to pry, but my point is that people should know the kind of person you are, your thinking. I happen to see you as a person of enormous inner resources. I have no idea what those resources are, but this is an extraordinary thing the way you have conducted your career, stuck with it despite every possible discouragement to you and setback and adversity and tragedies." And I said, "What I want the future generations to know is what it took, the kind of inner strength you had that kept you going and doing this kind of thing. If it's not there, I fear that people will make it up for you if you don't have anything to say about it." I gave that little talk two or three times, and the first time I did he said, "I agree with you. I'm just not ready yet."

Fentress: Right.

Young: And this was early on in the project. I said, "Any time you're ready I'll do it any way you want, any time you want. It will be just me in the room if that's what you want. You just let me know." And so we had that conversation a few more times. The latest, the last one, up at the Cape, once when I was up there, sitting before the fire and Vicki was there. Vicki said, "Jim, what is it you really want to get out of this personal life?" And I guess I had become pretty articulate by that point, in my little pitch. Ted is sitting over there listening, listening, so I gave my little spiel and she said, "Well, I'm very glad to hear that, because I think that's just the right

thing and that's just the right reason to do it. Teddy?" And Teddy said, "Yes, I think we can do that now."

I said fine, thinking it would be a little while off that we would do it. So I said, "OK, if you want to use somebody to transcribe it, I'll play by your rules with this and we won't do it through our editors or our transcribers or anything. It will just be me." He said, "That's fine. We'll have Barbs [Souliotis] do the transcript," and I said that's fine. So we went in to dinner. This was the night before. I think the interview was going to be on the [William J.] Clinton impeachment.

Fentress: The next day, was it?

Young: Yes. So we sat down and he said, "So, all right, why don't we just do this tomorrow?" And I said, "Well, sure, but you know, Senator, I'm not thinking of just one shot. I think it will take several sessions." And he said, "All right, so what do you want to talk about tomorrow?" The food was getting cold, and I couldn't eat, and I said, "I've kind of wondered whether what was really bothering you was the Chappaquiddick thing, and I just wondered if that's something you just want to get off your chest so we can go on to other things."

Vicki said, "Oh, Teddy, I *don't* think that's the best idea." Teddy said, "Well, it's up to Jim." I said, "I agree with you. I don't think it's the best idea. I think there are a lot more important things than that, but I just wondered whether this was something you just had to get out of the way." So he said, "OK, so what *are* we going to talk about tomorrow?"

I'm thinking, and I said, "All right—religion, politics, and you. You know, I don't even know whether you're an observant Catholic or not. I don't know what your faith means to you, if anything. I think you need to talk about that. I do remember your brother, before he was President, went out to Texas to assure people that he believed in the separation of church and state and that his decisions as President would not be instructed by the hierarchy." And I said, "I'm looking today at people who seem to think it's necessary to declare your religion and make your religion known to the public. That's the politics part of it. You've lived through all of this, from that time to this. How's that for a subject?" He said, fine, fine. Vicki said great.

Fentress: And off we go.

Young: And it went off and there was no briefing book, nothing.

Fentress: So you hadn't even prepared for this, necessarily.

Young: No.

Fentress: For this trip at all.

Young: No, no.

Fentress: Nor had he.

Young: No.

Fentress: Interesting.

Young: No, because the topic was up to me. He insisted that I take the lead and he would respond. It went wonderfully, and here again, I am not a Catholic, I wasn't brought up a Catholic, which was very good, because I was—

Fentress: Learning.

Young: I was learning and he was explaining to me, somebody who wasn't—and it was just a wonderful treatment about—it started out with going to Mass as a kid, the beauty, the rituals of the church, how fascinating it was, and about his mother going to Mass regularly and how that was part of the family thing.

Fentress: Did he go through being an altar boy?

Young: No, he didn't, but he said a little bit about that later.

Fentress: In Maine once we were in Mass—we have our Masses on Saturday because the priest comes over on the ferry, the only time we get him. The priest was in the middle of Mass and he's preparing the gifts, and the next thing you know, the Senator has gone up on the altar and brings the wine over, and the water, to the priest. The priest looks up and there's Ted Kennedy towering over him. And I said to Teddy on the way home, "What possessed you?" He said, "My mother always told me you never leave a priest alone on the altar, and I never have."

Young: Oh, that's wonderful. He told a funny story about being detailed by his father to round up Jack [Kennedy], when Jack tried to slip out and avoid Mass. I said, "But once you grew up and left home, you didn't have to do that anymore." He was talking about how much that was part of the family and one of the pillars of the family. I said, "But you didn't have to keep doing this once you left, and some people sort of drop out. Did you drop out or did you stay with it?" He said, "No." And I said, "Well, why? Why did you keep—" He said, "As you come to experience life, you've read about the parables and you've learned those, but as you get out into life, you begin to see the living parables and you begin to see that what you've learned, because you had to, now how it applies to your own life and your own experience in life. So it has powerful meaning to you. It lets you see life and see yourself in a larger universe."

I don't know how we got around to the subject of religion as a source of comfort or something at very bad times in your life, but he said, "You know, you do find yourself getting into these downward spirals, and there at some point, you've reached the foundation of the religion, you've reached religion, and that's what keeps you from keeping on the downward spiral. From that you can climb back up again and get back up again."

Fentress: I don't think he's discussed that. I never heard any discussions—

Young: No. It was quite riveting and it was very personal.

Fentress: It was very private with him.

Young: Vicki was there, and we then segued into religion and politics, where they were both joining in, and he talked about the hierarchy and the right turn in the hierarchy, and the priests they did not go to and the priests they did go to, and it just unfolded. And the retreats he would go on and take his children on. It just came alive and I said, *This is a deeply religious man.* I would have never thought that.

Fentress: Yes.

Young: I would have never known that. So that was the first window, and I was just in awe of what he said. Vicki said, "I've never heard him talk like that before." It was remarkable.

I think it was after that that I went up to the Cape another time. He was out on the front porch when I came up, and he said, "Hello, my friend," and that's when the friendship began.

Fentress: Yes, he told me a story that once the three of you were sitting out there on the rocking chairs, with the dogs out splashing, and you were looking at the sea, and how the three of you talked about this. He gave me a couple of little quick vignettes of a fond visit and how he had enjoyed it.

Young: Yes. That time on the porch, and it was not just the Catholic church, religion. There was a cosmos here that was all intertwined with the religion. It was in the evening, we were having a glass of wine out on the front porch. It was growing dusk and we sat at the table and he said, "Come outside." So we sat there. He said, "Do you hear that? Listen to that." It was the waves breaking up against the jetty, and he started making these sounds [*imitates the wind*]. He said, "You know the sea, it's talking, it's talking to us." These were just remarkable moments. And then he said, "You see her out there?" He was referring to the *Mya*. "And you see the way— you listen to this."

Fentress: That's special.

Young: I don't know—one time we came back from a sail and he turned around, looking back at the boat, coming in on the launch. He said, "She said she had a good sail. That's what she's saying. She had a good sail." Anyway, that's part of the closeness and the friendship that grew on top of, not in lieu of, the professional work, the serious work we were doing.

We had other sessions—quite painful for him, but he did it and he did it in his own way—about his losses, personal losses in the family, about Chappaquiddick. This was just extremely difficult for him and he organized it in his own way. It was very moving for me, but I was just letting him do the talking. That cemented our closeness again. He felt so good after that was over, it was done.

Fentress: I think that's when I got a call from him. He'd just finished. I think it was a personal interview and they were both very pleased, happy.

Young: He had to stop every—Vicki was just—and they could spend some time together and then come back.

Fentress: I don't know who, probably Vicki, but to have a lot of those interviews take place at the Cape—

Young: The Cape made a lot of difference, and I began to see that too, when he was there, how much—that was his childhood home and there wasn't any other place.

Fentress: Well, if you look at the way he's moved around, that's the anchor.

Young: Yes, yes.

Fentress: His memories of his parents and his brothers.

Young: We talked about his father's grief and his mother's anger, anger at God. This is all part of the religion. So it evolved to the point that we were very comfortable with each other.

Fentress: Well, Jim, I'll tell you, we were fortunate, because I remember when we first began five years ago, you were busy doing Presidential interviews.

Young: I dropped all that.

Fentress: I know you did. How did you decide to do that, to devote yourself to this project?

Young: Well, I felt it was an extraordinary project. I was kind of tired of doing Presidents. I had launched the Presidential projects and I had brought along younger people, scholars who would take them over. That was my strategy. I would start something and then bring them along, and then I'd go on to something else. So when the Kennedy project came along, I was ready to stop with the growing mountains of paperwork and all that goes with that. I was kind of sick of that, and it was getting worse every year, the bureaucracy, so I was happy to hand that off to somebody else.

But it was the intrinsic interest of Kennedy as a person of the Senate, and an opportunity to look at the Senate as a constitutional sharer in governance, what the President—you look at the President and everything you see is from the President's point of view, and you sort of adopt a Presidential perspective on everything. I had argued many years, many times against that, that parochialism, that we ought to do more than that, but the opportunity did not arise until Kennedy came. So this was something I already would have liked to have done, and it fitted in with where I thought oral history ought to expand. It was that, plus just the intrinsic interest. And also with Presidents, unless you do it from their beginnings and through their lives, the most you look at is eight years plus a campaign.

Fentress: Yes.

Young: And so it chops the history up, so that you have the world from the President's point of view. That's valuable to have in oral history, how the Presidency works—or doesn't work—you get to know that in spades, but you get a very short take on history. The Kennedy project had everything different. It had a long take on history; it had somebody who had been there through it all, a person who must have had the Senate in his blood. How it got there I wasn't sure, but it would be instructive about how the Senate is not, as often seen from the outside, obstructionists,

people who make trouble, an institution that makes trouble for the President. That is not the exclusive picture, but it's often a popular image when everything is written from the Presidential perspective, the journalists. So I thought that would be a real contribution. And I guess I was a student in the '60s and I just felt very touched by the Kennedys. I didn't go into public service, but it decided me to make a life of studying politics and people who were in public service. So this was a Kennedy.

Fentress: This project is, as you pointed out, very different from a Presidential oral history.

Young: Yes.

Fentress: And what it encompassed, the totality of the person.

Young: Yes. It was also good, and this—it changed my mind a bit about oral history in the sense of how it's done. The original idea I had when I started it up, when I did the [Jimmy] Carter White House, which was my first oral history project, was to get these people—and these were people who had been in office, who are not still in office—that was another different thing about it—the idea was to get them away, to sit down and have a day or two of reflection in the company of a select group of scholars.

I've come to see that that's not always the best oral history, because not everybody needs a day or a day-and-a-half, even if they can give it. And the idea of getting a President in a room and trying to find out—trying to do an oral history in a day, I've come to see, well, how did you ever get that data? I think I was scared they couldn't get any more time with them, and here was Senator Kennedy, who would make a long-term commitment. So I think do it in short bites, do it in a manageable manner, because then you learn as you go. You don't do that with one shot—

Fentress: You tend to build.

Young: And you build as you go, you learn more things, and it works much better this way. I was talking to Russell [Riley] the other day. He's just got the [George W.] Bush project, the 43 project assigned, and he said, "Well, you've moved away from your own principles that you taught me about doing these interviews," and I said, "I consider it growth, Russell, not moving away but moving on. I think you may come to the day when you will see that this is the best way to do it too, because not everybody needs equal time. They don't. And if they do need more than that or you need more than that, you can always do follow-ups, and that's a much better way to proceed."

It's been such a powerful experience for me that I often feel that some time in the future I would want to write about that experience, but I don't think I have another book in me. I'm very close to it and the work isn't quite over yet. Maybe I'll find some way.

Fentress: Once this is all put to bed in a year's time and you're sitting up there looking at the mountains, who knows?

Young: Not mowing the lawn. The best moments for that are with a glass of wine in the evening. That's the time.

Fentress: It brings a little perspective.

Young: Yes, it does, it does. Are we through?

Fentress: Yes, thank you.