LETTER FROM BERKELEY

December 24, 1964

Berkeley is strangely quiet. Students have scattered for the Christmas recess. The sky is grey and it has been raining intermittently for days. The great Plaza at the entrance to the campus is almost deserted, and it seems incredible that earlier this semester we saw, under a pleasant October sun, hundreds of students sitting quietly around a police car. The roof of the car was being used as a platform by a succession of speakers and singers, amplifiers carrying their voices across the plaza beyond the seated students to hundreds, sometimes thousands, of others--student, faculty, sightseer. Inside the car, a human captive. For more than thirty hours the life of the University flowed around this complex symbol—the car, at once platform and prison, a humbled chariot immobilized by bodies in the service of convictions.

It is impossible to tell the whole story or all the stories. But the Fall Semester of 1964 will surely become one of the great legends of the '60's. It deserves to be. It is dramatic and it clearly means something, although its meaning is elusive. This is not a play-by-play account but a statement of some
central themes.

There is, of course, a "free speech" theme. The University at Berkeley has over 27,000 students and the once-quiet town is now part of the great San Francisco-Bay Area metropolitan complex. The campus is no longer secluded and its life spills over into the community of which it is a peculiar part. There is a well-known history of town-gown, or state-gown struggle. We have had a "year of the oath," a battle with the House Un-American Activities Committee, a communist-speaker ban (recently rescinded). The present dispute about the university rules governing student advocacy and political action is a part of that history. Skipping all detail, it is correct to say, I think, that from the student point of view the university rules are seen as an attempt to interfere with the right of the student to engage fully and effectively in the civil rights struggle. From the administration point of view the problem is seen as that of insuring that the resources of a politically neutral state university are not used in support of the "partisan" or "non-university" purposes of its members. We are confronted, I believe, with a real problem, not simply with villainy or stupidity on one side or the other.

But the battle of Berkeley cannot be understood
in terms of this free speech issue alone. Early in the controversy students decided to test the rules by manning tables in defiance of the rules. From that point on the fighting issue became the student assertion of collective responsibility in the face of administrative determination to deal with the rule violations as individual disciplinary cases. For example: students man tables in violation of the rules. A few names are taken by university authorities. More students man the tables; their names are not taken. The "noted" violators are asked to report to the Dean's office. Instead of seven or eight students, hundreds appear, claiming equal guilt.

Or take the case of the immobilized car. A rule violator, not a currently registered student, is declared a trespasser and "arrested." Hundreds sit around the police car saying quite clearly: "We did what he did; arrest him, arrest us."

The last great sit-in which culminated in about 800 arrests was a direct response to the initiation of university disciplinary action against four of the student leaders in the car episode almost two months after the event. The students flatly refused to have their leaders singled out for punishment.

It is, of course, the massive, non-violent civil
disobedience that has given the Berkeley conflict its special tone—the tone which has infuriated and outraged so many and has raised cries of "anarchy" and "the rule of law." On two occasions there was recourse to massive use of police power. The result in each case was, I think, an enhancement of the moral stature of the student movement. This is the heart of the mystery. Why are the students unmoved by the appeal to "due process," to proper channels, to law and order?

The answer is quite simple. We, their elders, have taught them to distrust that appeal. We have taught them, by example, that if you respect due-process and fight your way to the Supreme Court and finally get a unanimous decision—what you get, then, is Tokenism. And Tokenism is not good enough.

Every generation must be brought to the commitment to the rational procedures of the culture. But the commitment can be rationally made only if the procedures are adequate to the urgent moral problems of the culture. It is not at all clear that our "process" is good enough. That is why what has been happening in Berkeley is more than a local quarrel. It is a crucial test of our culture. The challenge is a moral challenge.

One dramatic event remains indelible in my mind. With a resolution of most questions almost in sight
the administration took up old charges against four student leaders. Everyone seemed tired, beset by doubt and indecision. A rally was called for noon on the steps of Sproul Hall. Thousands came. And the ritual which has grown up here at the point of action unfolded. There is no whipping up of enthusiasm, no summoning of false courage. There are a few speeches. It becomes clear that a sit-in is being proposed. A quietness grows. Each individual confronts an utterly personal decision. No one is pressured. "We Shall Overcome" is sung. Quietly, one by one, students walk up the steps and the sit-in begins.

Well over seven hundred of them are now out on bail. Most of them, I suppose, are home for the holidays, trying to explain it all to relatives and friends.

Joseph Tussman