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Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

Ella Baker: Original Analysis 1903–1986

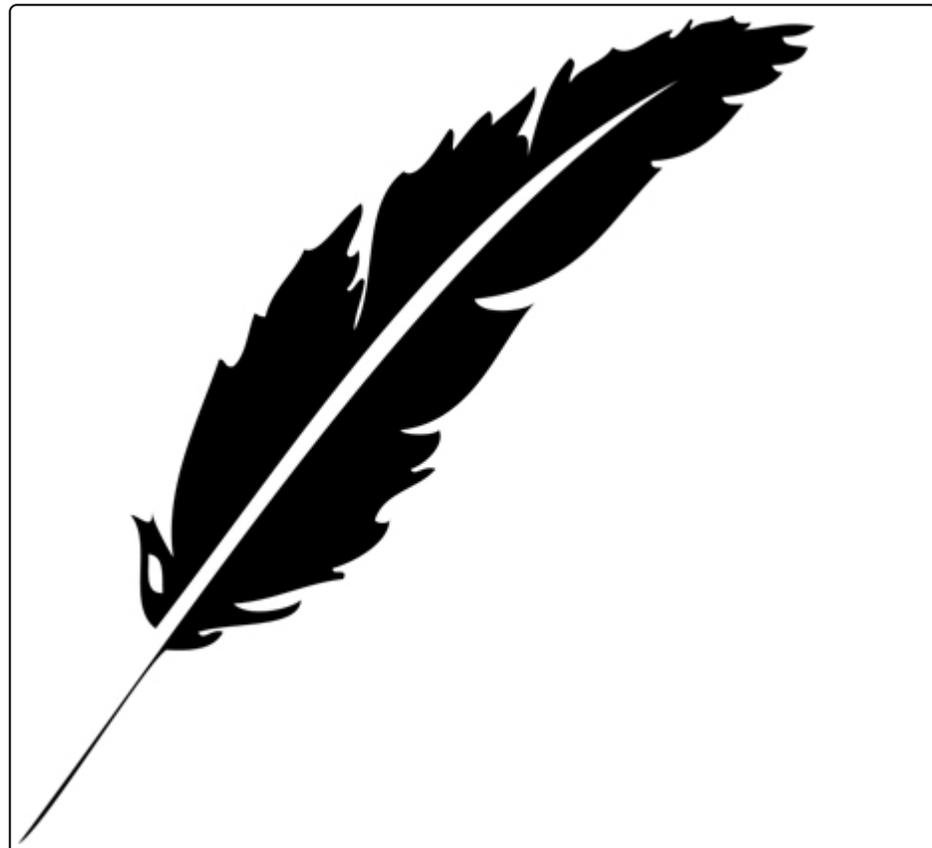
Mural on the wall of row houses in Philadelphia. The artist is Parris Stancell, sponsored by the Freedom School Mural Arts Program. By Tony Fischer ("We Who Believe in Freedom Cannot Rest")



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Overview



Ella Baker, born in Norfolk, Virginia, in 1903, was an enigmatic figure. She spent most of her career working behind the scenes, helping to organize the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and other civil rights groups, yet she was a charismatic public speaker. She had an ordinary childhood in a middle-class family, but when she went to live in the Harlem neighborhood of New York City, she was exposed to much of the leftist thought that was then popular among many African American intellectuals. She studied the works of Karl Marx, the nineteenth-century Socialist and economic theorist, and adapted the rhetoric of Marxism to her speeches. It is likely that her numerous conversations with other leftists helped her form the notion that society should be changed to suit people, instead of insisting that people adapt to society. As her career in the civil rights movement developed, she dropped much of her commitment to Socialism, even though she continued occasionally to use Marxist terminology in her speeches. Indeed, her belief that power should build from the bottom up instead of the top down put her in a long tradition of American political thought dating back to before the Revolutionary War. Much of her work helped bring closer to realization the ideals held by many of those who fought that war and who eventually wrote the Constitution.

When Baker graduated from college in April 1927, she wanted to become a missionary or social worker, but she could not afford the additional education she needed to get a job as one or the other, so she moved to New York City to look for opportunities. By 1930 she was involved in the management of the Young Negroes' Cooperative League and served as its national director for about four years. The league was part of an international movement in which people pooled their resources to provide food and other necessities for themselves; with mostly poor African Americans in the league, Baker developed her skills in the grassroots organizing of people who had little money and often had never voted.

The Great Depression of the 1930s was difficult for Baker, and during that decade she learned how to work with little money as well as how to motivate people with her speeches. During these years she worked as a publicist for the National Negro Congress and as a teacher and project supervisor for the federal government's Works Progress Administration. Her work from 1938 to 1946 for the NAACP—and with the New York Urban League beginning in 1946—had much to do with the NAACP's growth and success, and during that period she honed her motivational speaking skills into the style found in "The Black Woman in the Civil Rights Struggle." During the 1950s and 1960s, Baker tried to work quietly behind the scenes to organize civil rights workers; she did so because she wanted people themselves, and not outsiders, to make important choices about their lives. By the 1970s she was a respected figure among civil rights leaders but not well known outside the civil rights movement. This changed when historians began recognizing her achievements, and Baker was sought out by interviewers who wished to record her views of the civil rights movement.

Explanation and Analysis of Documents

Much of what Baker said and wrote has been lost. She did not write her speeches down, so the only way for them to survive was for someone to take notes or tape Baker as she spoke. She wrote many letters that offer glimpses behind the scenes of civil rights organizations, but they are scattered in many collections. "Bigger Than a Hamburger" is the best known of her documents and a rare instance of her committing her thoughts to the printed word. In it, she explains the broad social implications of the small acts of civil disobedience of sit-ins by African American college students at whites-only dining counters or tables. "The Black Woman in the Civil Rights Struggle," one of few remaining records of her many speeches, has historical significance because it provides an example of her remarkable ability to galvanize audiences with her speeches. The topic of this speech was one of her preoccupations: the contributions of women to the civil rights movement. Although she gave many interviews in the 1970s and 1980s, only a few have been published, including "Developing Community Leadership" and "Ella Baker: Organizing for Civil Rights." They offer insights into her thinking and her priorities during the time she organized local civil rights groups, sometimes at the risk of her life.

"Bigger Than a Hamburger"

Although Baker had been important in organizing the SCLC, she had been frustrated by the role she and other women played in the organization. While women were doing much of the work behind the scenes to make the organization a powerful force in the civil rights movement, they were denied opportunities to shine. Then, on February 1, 1960, a Woolworth's store in Greensboro, North Carolina, became the starting place for a new movement when four African American college students sat at a whites-only dining counter and refused to leave until they were served. After several days of sit-ins, the Woolworth's began serving African Americans at

the whites-only counter. College students through much of the South staged their own sit-ins, and gradually restaurants that had excluded African Americans began serving them. Baker recognized the potential of the sit-ins; she brought her formidable skills to bear on what was a disorganized movement of random protests and gave them organization, allowing the participants to form an effective social movement with broader consequences. “Bigger Than a Hamburger” derived from Baker’s experience at a gathering of college students. The title of the article reflects her view that the sit-ins could have wide-ranging social consequences.

At the start of her article, Baker pointedly mentions white as well as black students. There had been disagreement among African Americans over the issue of inviting white students to participate in what became the SNCC. Although Baker often said she wanted the students to run their organization their way, she prodded the organizers into inviting white students to participate in the SNCC’s projects, especially voter-registration drives. Hence her emphatic assertion “Whatever may be the difference in approach to their goal, the Negro and white students, North and South, are seeking to rid America of the scourge of racial segregation and discrimination—not only at lunch counters, but in every aspect of life.” This statement served two important purposes. First, it gave the SNCC greater moral authority than it otherwise would have had by making the organization’s efforts appeal to everyone rather than just to one segment of society. Second, it gave the SNCC universal authority because, as Baker points out, it addressed a profound moral problem that affects all of humanity. She had long sought to broaden the civil rights movement beyond African Americans into one in which everyone had a stake.

For most of her career Baker had made a point of soliciting the views of people who rarely had a say in how a civil rights organization was run. Her skill at making people comfortable enough to tell her what they really wanted worked well with college students, and she wanted to be emphatic that the decisions of the members of the SNCC came from the members themselves, although the very process of creating a “democratic” organization meant that Baker was impressing her own views about “group-centered leadership” on the new organization. She asserts that participation in decisions is important for young people who may not have had the education that taught them leadership; the dynamics of the group would give them the experience they needed to think for themselves. Even though Baker sometimes used such Marxist concepts and wording as “his highest potential for the benefit of the group,” her belief in the primary importance of individuals was antithetical to Marxism and fit into a traditional line of American thought. She calls “unhealthy” the imposition of well-meaning adult leadership on students, because it would harm them by taking away their opportunities to make their own decisions and deal with the consequences. This is a warning to the leaders of the SNCC, who were debating among themselves how they might take over the student-led movement and subordinate its activities to their own organization.

Time Line

1903 December 13

Ella Baker was born in Norfolk, Virginia.

1927 April

Baker graduates from Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina.

1931–1934

Baker works as national director of the Young Negroes’ Cooperative League.

1938

Baker joins the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

1941–1943

Baker is the field secretary for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

1943 April 15

Baker becomes the director of branches for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, serving until July 15, 1946.

1954

Baker is elected president of the New York chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

1958

Baker helps establish the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

1960

Baker helps found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

June

Baker’s article “Bigger Than a Hamburger” is published in *Southern Patriot*.

1969

Baker delivers her speech “The Black Woman in the Civil Rights Struggle” to the Institute for the Black World in Atlanta, Georgia.

1973

Gerda Lerner's December 1970 interview of Baker, "Developing Community Leadership," is published in *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*.

1980

Ellen Cantarow and Susan Gushee O'Malley's interview of Baker, "Ella Baker: Organizing for Civil Rights," is published in *Moving the Mountain: Women Working for Social Change*.

1986 December 13

Baker dies in New York City.

1994 September 24

Baker is posthumously inducted into the National Women's Hall of Fame.

"The Black Woman in the Civil Rights Struggle"

Eyewitness accounts indicate that Baker was an inspirational speaker who drew her audiences into her themes by recounting unfamiliar history. She then would move to a statement of objectives and outline what she thought could be done. A theme that became ever more central to her thinking was that of the role of women in the civil rights movement. She believed that women were not being given their due for their work and the risks they took.

What makes this speech special is not so much its timing or its audience—probably students at a conference—but that it was tape-recorded. Her voice was deep, which surprised some listeners. Her pattern of speech and accent sounded educated, and she made no attempt to imitate the speaking patterns of her audiences, preferring to use her normal pattern of speaking. She often said that if she spoke like the person she was—educated and raised in a middle-class family—her audiences would have no trouble understanding her; she, in turn, had no trouble understanding them because she listened carefully to them.

Her remark "I have existed much longer than you" suggests that Baker was addressing an audience of young people. Baker mentions Vincent Harding and Bernice Reagon. Harding worked with Baker in the 1960s and in the 1980s became a noted historian; Reagon was Baker's longtime friend. Baker first touches on the plight of African American slaves, noting forms of resistance that were open to women. One was to pretend to be too sick to work; another was to commit infanticide to prevent their children from growing up as slaves. "There is a story of a woman in Kentucky," she says, "who had borne thirteen children and strangled each of them with her own hands rather than have them grow up as slaves." As a rhetorical device, this has shock value: It tends to rivet one's attention on the speaker while one wonders what other horrors may be in the offing. It also serves to emphasize the point that Baker wanted to make—that the lives of slaves were severely circumscribed, leaving them little opportunity to express their frustration and anger. Further, Baker lays out the notion that commitment to freedom and resentment of unjust treatment were part of the lives of African American women even among those who were slaves and, in fact, stood behind such dire acts as infanticide.

Baker and her own generation knew of many African American women who were also committed to freedom and who resented the restricted lives brought about by the laws and customs of segregation. Baker saw herself as born into the era in which African Americans were selectively educated, with the educated intended to become leaders of the uneducated. This was a subject near to Baker's heart because she believed that it embodied a wrongheaded approach to civil rights. To her mind, educating anyone to become a leader was intended to make African Americans conform to standards of behavior favored by their oppressors rather than to actually benefit those who most needed help in obtaining their rights. Although she cites the 1960s as the era for the emergence of a new idea, actually she had been advocating that very idea at least since the time she joined the NAACP: that liberation would come when the people being helped were helping themselves. To her, the civil rights movement's organizations should listen to what average African Americans wanted and then help them realize their hopes. Much of her life was spent listening to even the poorest of the poor because she believed a lack of formal education did not prevent people from thinking about their lives and understanding what they most needed.

In her account of the history of the shift from conforming to society to reshaping society, Baker perhaps gives too short shrift to what she calls "legalism"—the effort to eliminate segregation through courts of law. For instance, the outlawing by the U.S. Supreme Court of racial segregation in education was a momentous event in the civil rights movement, changing how money was spent on education and who benefited from public education. Her misgivings about legalism stemmed from her belief that legal fighting was a top-down affair, with an African American social elite guiding the process on the assumption that they knew better than other African Americans what would be best for them. She hoped that the 1960s marked a shift to what she called "indigenous leaders," meaning people who were members of the communities they represented rather than outsiders telling the communities what was best for them.

Notable in this speech is Baker's introduction of feminist ideas. She had been asked to speak about African American women, so the presence of a feminist outlook is no surprise, but it is unclear whether Baker thought of herself as a feminist. She had long chafed under restrictions she believed had been placed on her only because she was a woman, and she had sometimes expressed her resentment of such restrictions. She suggests that the subordination of African American women may be ending. In her discussion of the roles of women, she gives a definition of the word *radical* that is indeed accurate: "I use the term radical in its original meaning—getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change the system." That it is her personal definition of the word is revealing, because she used the word on other occasions to describe herself and her objectives.

Although Baker had been heavily influenced by Marxists during her early years in New York, she had long been shifting away from Marxist dogma. The Marxist phrase *masses of the people* was becoming antiquated even by 1969, perhaps because of its vagueness. Her use of the word *cadres* in her conclusion is likely a relic from her youth, meant to refer to organized groups of local people who would be committed to a universal course of action.

"Developing Community Leadership"

Interviews with Baker often seem more like essays she has thoughtfully composed, perhaps because she had delivered so many speeches that she had already organized in her memory what she wanted to say and how she wanted to say it. In this interview, she discusses why organizing on a community-by-community basis is important for the civil rights movement. Baker mentions the psychologist Kenneth Clark, who conducted a study on the self-esteem of African American schoolchildren that points out the ill effects of segregated education on children. This study was used by the NAACP in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case (1954), in which the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that segregated education was inherently unequal and therefore unconstitutional. Clark and his wife, Mamie Phipps Clark, influenced Baker's approach to organizing local community-based civil rights groups.

Baker discusses the ramifications of the Supreme Court decision and the ways in which it affected the civil rights movement. She believed that the movement had to shift from battling in courts to organizing the people most in need of legal protections but least likely to receive them. Hence, Baker mentions de facto segregation—that is, segregation that is not embodied in law but is nonetheless practiced in society. Her example is the integration of New York schools and the discomfort caused by her suggestion that African American children live in white communities in order to integrate schools in those communities. She believed that there had to be a change in how Americans thought about race and segregation in order for the Supreme Court ruling of 1954 to have its fullest effect.

Baker explains why she did not believe strong central leadership could bring about the changes needed for people to fully realize their civil rights. As she put it, "I've never believed that the people who control things really were willing and able to pay the price of integration." In her works, she often makes pointed references to such charismatic leaders as Martin Luther King, Jr. She regarded their work as mostly grandstanding, with leaders like King becoming beholden to the news media that made them household names. "The charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight," she says. "The media made him, and the media may undo him." She explains that top-down leadership can result in large gaps between what ordinary people want and what their leaders try to achieve. Thus, Baker spent most of her career talking to individual community members in many different parts of the country, asking them what they wanted and discovering that no matter how uneducated they might have been, they had strong ideas about what would help them the most. Baker says she sought out the opinions of people who were not traditionally considered leaders. Her goal was to help generate a movement based on the everyday needs of people and that attracted a broad base of support among those who had an important stake in the success of civil rights organizations, such as the NAACP. Further, she hoped that by participating in community-based organizing, educated people would stop seeing themselves as an elite.

"Ella Baker: Organizing for Civil Rights"

In this interview Baker combines both theory and practice to explain how she pursued her work as a social activist. Her first objective was to break down the social distance between educated people and uneducated ones, between well-to-do people and poor ones. She notes how people will create excuses for not caring about the violation of civil rights and say that those whose rights were violated deserved their mistreatment. Baker indicates the pragmatic course her comments will take by suggesting that the underprivileged not be insulted or otherwise denigrated. Instead, a civil rights organizer should try to show how the lives of the privileged few

and the underprivileged many have much in common. Baker is practical enough to note that this effort to educate the privileged few does not always work, but she insists that an organizer must try.

In addition to the theme of how to organize civil rights groups, Baker takes up the topic of violence. Here she gives an example of what middle-class African Americans might have in common with poor African Americans. She paints the picture starkly when she describes, for example, middle-class communities in Tampa, Florida, where homes were burned and where men protected their families and property with guns. "Disease doesn't have such a long barrier between us," she says. "As long as the violations of the rights of Tom Jones could take place with impunity, you are not secure." It would be easy to pigeonhole Baker by believing that her philosophy was one of nonviolence, but it would be untrue. Often armed men and women protected her, and during her speeches in the South guards with rifles frequently stood at the entrances to the meeting hall or church where she was speaking. She believed that people had the right to use violence to combat violence. Although she helped the SNCC, she regarded students' commitment to nonviolence to be naive and foolish; she believed that African Americans sometimes had to protect themselves against racist violence. She thought that the idea of African Americans protecting their lives and property with guns was appropriate and a matter of being pragmatic in a violent world.

To draw people into a civil rights organization, Baker insists that they should be talked with as equals, that condescension in behavior or speech would be detected and would be a barrier between an organizer and those she hoped to organize. This offers insight into what Baker actually did, as one story indicates. She eloquently describes the way in which she was able to reach across the divide at a church in St. Petersburg, Florida: "One lady came and all she could say was how my dress was the same as hers. Now, she didn't know how to deal with issues. But she identified. And she joined." Although Baker had a great career as an organizer, she never earned much money. To wear the same kind of clothes as rank-and-file members of a group would wear came naturally to her. She concludes by arguing that recruiting from disenfranchised people results in an organization that is strong at its base, with its members doing their own recruiting in their communities among people they knew and who knew them; this would be good for the long-term health of a civil rights organization.

Impact and Legacy

For most of her life, Baker was well known among people who participated in the civil rights movement but not among the general public; this seems to have irritated her, and she enjoyed the recognition she received near the end of her life. The civil rights movement might have been very different had she not participated in it. Her work for the NAACP helped broaden its base of support and helped enrich it enough that it could afford the often costly court battles it waged to win civil rights for African Americans. To hear her tell it, the SCLC would not have existed at all had she not organized it; history may affirm her view, because the SCLC does not seem to have become an organization until after she went to Atlanta and worked with King and other leaders of the group. She was not the creator of sit-ins—college students came up with the idea on their own—but the SNCC might not have been formed had she not helped organize it and build its membership. She indirectly had a hand in almost every success of the civil rights movement of the 1950s because she had helped provide civil rights activists with the means to strive for their goals. She drew people by the thousands, and through those thousands perhaps millions of others, to the civil rights movement through her many speeches, often given to small groups under fearful conditions. These people have continued her work to involve the rank and file in making decisions and to reshape society to meet the needs of its populace.

Key Sources

The Ella Baker Papers (1926) collection is held in the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York Public Library. Baker participated in the oral history project "Documenting the American South"; her interview "Oral History Interview with Ella Baker" (September 4, 1974), can be found online at <http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0007/> (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/G-0007/>). *Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker* is a 1981 documentary about her life.

Essential Quotes

"Whatever may be the difference in approach to their goal, the Negro and white students, North and South, are seeking to rid America of the scourge of racial segregation and discrimination—not only at lunch counters, but in every aspect of life."

("Bigger Than a Hamburger")

"Wherever there has been struggle, black women have been identified with that struggle."

("The Black Woman in the Civil Rights Struggle")

"I use the term radical in its original meaning—getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change the system."

("The Black Woman in the Civil Rights Struggle")

"I've never believed that the people who control things really were willing and able to pay the price of integration."

("Developing Community Leadership")

"Every time I see a young person who has come through the system to a stage where he could profit from the system and identify with it, but who identifies more with the struggle of black people who have not had his chance, every time I find such a person I take new hope. I feel a new life as a result of it."

("Developing Community Leadership")

"If you got it, if you really identify with him, what you wear won't make a damn bit of difference. But if you talk differently, and somehow talk down to people, they can sense it. They can feel it. And they know whether you are talking with them, or talking at them, or talking about them."

("Ella Baker: Organizing for Civil Rights")

Further Reading

Articles

- 1 James, Joy. "Ella Baker: 'Black Women's Work' and Activist Intellectuals." *Black Scholar* 24 (1994): 8–15.

Books

- 2 Cantarow, Ellen, et al. *Moving the Mountain: Women Working for Social Change*. New York: Feminist Press, 1980.
- 3 Carson, Clayborne. In *Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981.———et al., eds. *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle, 1954–1990*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.
- 4 Dallard, Shyrlee. *Ella Baker: A Leader behind the Scenes*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Silver Burdett Press, 1990.
- 5 Grant, Joanne. *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound*. New York: John Wiley, 1998.
- 6 Lerner, Gerda. *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History*. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.
- 7 Ransby, Barbara. *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

—Kirk H. Beetz

Questions for Further Study

In "Bigger Than a Hamburger," Baker argues that white people should be included in the movement to establish civil rights for all Americans. This is part of an overall message of inclusion as she goes on to urge participation of people from different regions and age groups. What points does she use to make her case? Do you agree or disagree with her approach and why?

Baker's speech on black women in the civil rights struggle highlights the unique role of African American females in resisting racial oppression. In what ways has the struggle been different for black women than for black men?

Although she did not mention Martin Luther King, Jr., by name in her interview on the subject of developing community leadership, Baker often referred to him and other civil rights leaders with a degree of skepticism. Particularly notable in this document is the fourth paragraph, in which she discusses the pitfalls of "depend[ing] so largely upon a ... charismatic leader."

Examine the issue as Baker expresses it and critique her viewpoint. What have been the advantages and disadvantages of relying on such leadership in the civil rights movement? Have the advantages outweighed the disadvantages or vice versa?

Document Text

“BIGGER THAN A HAMBURGER” 1960

The Student Leadership Conference made it crystal clear that current sit-ins and other demonstrations are concerned with something much bigger than a hamburger or even a giant-sized Coke.

Whatever may be the difference in approach to their goal, the Negro and white students, North and South, are seeking to rid America of the scourge of racial segregation and discrimination—not only at lunch counters, but in every aspect of life.

In reports, casual conversations, discussion groups, and speeches, the sense and the spirit of the following statement that appeared in the initial newsletter of the students at Barber-Scotia College, Concord, N.C., were re-echoed time and again:

We want the world to know that we no longer accept the inferior position of second-class citizenship. We are willing to go to jail, be ridiculed, spat upon and even suffer physical violence to obtain First Class Citizenship.

By and large, this feeling that they have a destined date with freedom, was not limited to a drive for personal freedom, or even freedom for the Negro in the South. Repeatedly it was emphasized that the movement was concerned with the moral implications of racial discrimination for the “whole world” and the “Human Race.”

This universality of approach was linked with a perceptive recognition that “it is important to keep the movement democratic and to avoid struggles for personal leadership.”

It was further evident that desire for supportive cooperation from adult leaders and the adult community was also tempered by apprehension that adults might try to “capture” the student movement. The students showed willingness to be met on the basis of equality, but were intolerant of anything that smacked of manipulation or domination.

This inclination toward *group-centered leadership*, rather than toward a *leader-centered group pattern of organization*, was refreshing indeed to those of the older group who bear the scars of the battle, the frustrations and the disillusionment that come when the prophetic leader turns out to have heavy feet of clay.

However hopeful might be the signs in the direction of group-centeredness, the fact that many schools and communities, especially in the South, have not provided adequate experience for young Negroes to assume initiative and think and act independently accentuated the need for guarding the student movement against well-meaning, but nevertheless unhealthy, over-protectiveness.

Here is an opportunity for adult and youth to work together and provide genuine leadership—the development of the individual to his highest potential for the benefit of the group.

Many adults and youth characterized the Raleigh meeting as the greatest or most significant conference of our period.

Whether it lives up to this high evaluation or not will, in a large measure, be determined by the extent to which there is more effective training in and understanding of non-violent principles and practices, in group dynamics, and in the re-direction into creative channels of the normal frustrations and hostilities that result from second-class citizenship.

Glossary

Barber-Scotia College:	a historically black institution, founded as a “seminary for women” in Concord, North Carolina, in 1867
Negro:	at that time, this word, though usually considered offensive today, was the most common and “politically correct” term for African Americans
Raleigh meeting:	a conference for youth activists, hosted by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference at Shaw University, Baker’s alma mater, in Raleigh, North Carolina, over Easter weekend 1960
Student Leadership Conference:	a reference to what became the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

Document Text

“THE BLACK WOMAN IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE” 1969

I think that perhaps because I have existed much longer than you and have to some extent maintained some degree of commitment to a goal of freedom that this is the reason Vincent Harding invited me to come down as an exhibit of what might possibly be the goal of some of us to strive toward—that is, to continue to identify with the struggle as long as the struggle is with us.

I was a little bit amazed as to why the selection of a discussion on the role of black women in the world. I just said to Bernice Reagon that I have never been one to feel great needs in the direction of setting myself apart as a woman. I've always thought first and foremost of people as individuals ... [but] wherever there has been struggle, black women have been identified with that struggle. During slavery there was a tremendous amount of resistance in various forms. Some were rather subtle and some were rather shocking. One of the subtle forms was that of feigning illness.... One of the other forms of resistance which was perhaps much more tragic and has not been told to a great extent is the large number of black women who gave birth to children and killed them rather than have them grow up as slaves. There is a story of a woman in Kentucky who had borne thirteen children and strangled each of them with her own hands rather than have them grow up as slaves. Now this calls for a certain kind of deep *commitment* and *resentment*. *Commitment* to freedom and deep *resentment* against slavery.

I would like to divide my remaining comments into two parts. First, the aspect that deals with the struggle to get into the society, the struggle to be a part of the American scene. Second, the struggle for a different kind of society. The latter is the more radical struggle. In the previous period, the period of struggling to be accepted, there were certain goals, concepts, and values such as the drive for the “Talented Tenth.” That, of course, was the concept that proposed that through the process of education black people would be accepted in the American culture and they would be accorded their rights in proportion to the degree to which they qualified as being persons of learning and culture....

[There was] an assumption that those who were trained were not trained to be *part* of the community, but to be *leaders* of the community. This carried with it another false assumption that being a leader meant that you were separate and apart from the masses, and to a large extent people were to look up to you, and that your responsibility to the people was to *represent* them. This means that the people were never given a sense of their own values.... Later, in the 1960s, a different concept emerged: the concept of the right of the people to participate in the decisions that affected their lives. So part of the struggle was the struggle toward intellectualism [which] so often separated us so far from the masses of people that the gulf was almost too great to be bridged.

The struggle for being a part of the society also led to another major phase of the civil rights struggle. That was the period in which legalism or the approach to battling down the barriers of racial segregation through the courts [which] was spearheaded by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.... We moved from the question of equal educational opportunity in terms of teachers' salaries into another phase: equality in travel accommodations.... One of the young persons who was part of the first efforts to test [segregated travel] was Pauli Murray. Pauli Murray and I were part of a committee that was organized to try to go into the South to test Jim Crow in bus travel. But the decision was made that only the men could go.... I had just finished a tour of duty with the NAACP and had ridden a lot of Jim Crow buses and wanted very much to go, but I guess it was decided that I was too frail to make such a journey.

I think the period that is most important to most of us now is the period when we began to question whether we really wanted in. Even though the sit-in movement started off primarily as a method of getting in, it led to the concept of questioning whether it was worth trying to get in. The first effort was to be able to sit down at the lunch counters. When you look back and think of all the tragedy and suffering that the first sit-inners went through you begin to wonder, Why pay a price like that for the privilege of eating at lunch counters? There were those who saw from the beginning that it was part of the struggle for full dignity as a human being. So out of that came two things that to me are very significant. First, there was the concept of the trained finding their identity with the masses. Another thing that came out of it at a later period was that of leadership training. As the young people moved out into the community and finally were able to be accepted, they began to discover indigenous leaders....

Around 1965 there began to develop a great deal of questioning about what is the role of women in the struggle. Out of it came a concept that black women had to bolster the ego of the male. This implied that the black male had been treated in such a manner as to have been emasculated both by the white society and black women because the female was the head of the household. We began to deal with the question of the need of black women to play the subordinate role. I personally have never thought of this as being valid because it raises the question as to whether the black man is going to try to be a man on the basis of his capacity to deal with issues and situations rather than be a man because he has some people around him who claim him to be a man by taking subordinate roles.

I don't think you could go through the Freedom Movement without finding that the backbone of the support of the Movement were women. When demonstrations took place and when the community acted, usually it was some woman who came to the fore....

I think at this stage the big question is, What is the American society? Is it the kind of society that ... permits people to grow and develop according to their capacity, that gives them a sense of value, not only for themselves, but a sense of value for other human beings? Is this the kind of society that is going to permit that? I think there is a great question as to whether it can become that kind of society....

In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in *radical* terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning—getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change the system. That is easier said than done. But one of the things that has to be faced is, in the process of wanting to change the system, how much have we got to do to find out who we are, where we have come from and where we are going? About twenty-eight years ago I used to go around making speeches, and I would open up my talk by saying that there was a man who had a health problem and he was finally told by the doctor that they could save his sight or save his memory, but they couldn't save both. They asked him which did he want and he said, "Save my sight because I would rather see where I am going than remember where I have been." I am saying as you must say, too, that in order to see where we are going, we not only must remember where we've been, but *we must understand where we have been*. This calls for a great deal of analytical thinking and evaluation of methods that have been used. We have to begin to think in terms of where do we really want to go and how we want to get there.

Finally, I think it is also to be said that it is not a job that is going to be done by all the people simultaneously. Some will have to be in cadres, the advanced cadres, and some will have to come later. But one of the guiding principles has to be that we cannot lead a struggle that involves masses of people without getting the people to understand what their potentials are, what their strengths are.

Glossary

cadres:	groups of trained leaders
feigning:	pretending
Jim Crow:	a term, based on an African American character in a stage show, for the system of legalized segregation that prevailed in the southern United States from 1876 to 1965

Document Text

“DEVELOPING COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP” 1970

Black people who were living in the South were constantly living with violence. Part of the job was to help them to understand what that violence was and how they in an organized fashion could help to stem it. The major job was getting people to understand that they had something within their power that they could use, and it could only be used if they understood what was happening and how group action could counter violence even when it was perpetrated by the police or, in some instances, the state. My basic sense of it has always been to get people to understand that in the long run they themselves are the only protection they have against violence or injustice. If they only had ten members in the NAACP at a given point, those ten members could be in touch with twenty-five members in the next little town, with fifty in the next and throughout the state as a result of the organization of state conferences, and they, of course, could be linked up with the national. People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves....

When the 1954 Supreme Court decision on school desegregation came, I was serving as chairman of the Educational Committee of the New York branch [of the NAACP]. We began to deal with the problems of *de facto* segregation, and the results of the *de facto* segregation which were evidenced largely in the achievement levels of black children, going down instead of going up after they entered public school. We had called the first committee meeting and Kenneth Clark became the chairman of that committee [the Intergroup Committee]. During that period, I served on the Mayor's Commission on School Integration, with the subdivision on zoning. In the summer of 1957, I gave time to organizing what we called Parents in Action for Quality Education.

I've never believed that the people who control things really were willing and able to pay the price of integration. From a practical standpoint, anyone who looked at the Harlem area knew that the potential for integration *per se* was basically impossible unless there were some radically innovative things done.

And those innovative things would not be acceptable to those who ran the school system, nor to communities, nor even to the people who call themselves supporters of integration. I did a good deal of speaking, and I went to Queens, I went to the Upper West Side, and the people very eagerly said they wanted school integration. But when you raised the question of whether they would permit or would welcome blacks to live in the same houses with them, which was the only practical way at that stage to achieve integration, they squirmed. Integration certainly had to be pushed concurrently with changing the quality of education that the black children were getting, and changing the attitudes of the educational establishment toward the black community...

I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed peoples to depend so largely upon a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight. It usually means he has been touted through the public media, which means that the media made him, and the media may undo him. There is also the danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he *is* the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time, and they don't do the work of actually organizing people.

For myself, circumstances frequently dictated what had to be done as I saw it. For example, I had no plans to go down and set up the office of SCLC. But it seemed unless something were done whatever impetus had been gained would be lost, and nobody else was available who was willing or able to do it. So I went because to me it was more important to do what was a potential for all of us than it was to do what I might have done for myself. I knew from the beginning that as a woman, an older woman, in a group of ministers who are accustomed to having women largely as supporters, there was no place for me to have come into a leadership role. The competition wasn't worth it.

The movement of the '50s and '60s was carried largely by women, since it came out of church groups. It was sort of second nature to women to play a supportive role. How many made a conscious decision on the basis of the larger goals, how many on the basis of habit pattern, I don't know. But it's true that the number of women who carried the movement is much larger than that of men. Black women have had to carry this role, and I think the younger women are insisting on an equal footing.

I don't advocate anybody following the pattern I followed, unless they find themselves in a situation where they think that the larger goals will be shortchanged if they don't. From the standpoint of the historical pattern of society, which seems to assume that this is the best role for women, I think that certainly the young people who are challenging this ought to be challenging it, and it ought to be changed. But I also think you have to have a certain sense of your own value, and a sense of security on your part, to be able to forgo the glamour of what the leadership role offers. From the standpoint of my work and my own self-concepts, I don't think I have thought of myself largely as a woman. I thought of myself as an individual with a certain amount of sense of the need of people to participate in the movement. I have always thought what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people. Every time I see a young person who has come through the system to a stage where he could profit from the system and identify with it, but who identifies more with the struggle of black people who have not had his chance, every time I find such a person I take new hope. I feel a new life as a result of it.

Glossary

de facto:	in fact, even if not established as a formal theory or law
NAACP:	the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a civil rights organization founded in 1909
the national:	the national leadership of the NAACP
per se:	in and of itself

Document Text

“ELLA BAKER: ORGANIZING FOR CIVIL RIGHTS” 1980

On what basis do you seek to organize people? Do you start to try to organize them on the fact of what *you* think, or what they are first interested in? You start where the *people* are. Identification with people. There's always this problem in the minority group that is escalating up the ladder in this culture, I think. Those who have gotten some training and those who have gotten some material gains, it's always the problem of their not understanding the possibility of being divorced from those who are not in their social classification. Now, there were those who felt they had made it, would be embarrassed by the fact that some people would get drunk and get in jail, and so they wouldn't be concerned too much about whether they were brutalized in jail. 'Cause he was a *drunk!* He was a so-and-so. Or she was a streetwalker. We get caught in that bag. And so you have to help break that down without alienating them at the same time. The gal who has been able to buy her minks and whose husband is a professional, they live well. You can't insult her, you never go and tell her she's a so-and-so for taking, for *not* identifying. You try to point out where her interest lies in identifying with that other one across the tracks who doesn't have minks.

How do you do that? You don't always succeed, but you try. You'd point out what had happened, in certain cases, where whole communities were almost destroyed by police brutality on a large scale. They went and burned the better homes. In Tampa, Florida, I met some of those people whose homes were burned down. These were people I'd call middle class. The men got the guns, and they carried their womenfolk and the children into the woods. And they stood guard. Some stood guard over the people in the woods, and they stood guard over their homes and property, ready to shoot. So what you do is to cite examples that had taken place somewhere else. You had to be persuasive on the basis of fact. You cite it, you see. This can happen to *you*. Sometimes you're able to cite instances of where there's been a little epidemic, or an outbreak of the more devastating kinds of disease. You point out that those of us who live across the railroad track and are in greater filth or lack of sanitation can have an effect on you who live on the other side, 'cause disease doesn't have such a long barrier between us, you see. As long as the violations of the rights of Tom Jones could take place with impunity, you are not secure. So you helped to reestablish a sense of identity of each with the struggle.

Of course, your success depended on both your disposition and your capacity to sort of stimulate people—and how you carried yourself, in terms of not being above people. And see, there were more people who were not economically secure than there were economically secure people. I didn't *have* any mink—I don't have any now—but you don't go into a group where minks are prohibitive in terms of getting them and carry your minks and throw 'em around. Why, they can't get past *that*. They can't get past the fact that you got minks and they don't have mink. And see, I had no problems 'cause I didn't have none. Nor did I have aspirations for these things.

I remember one place I got a contribution for a life membership in the NAACP, which was five-hundred dollars then, was from a longshoremen's union. They remembered somebody who had been there before from the NAACP, with a mink coat. When they gave this five-hundred dollar membership, somebody mentioned it. See, they had resented the mink coat. I don't think it was the mink coat that they resented. It was the *barrier* they could sense between them and the person in the coat. See, you can have a mink coat on and you can identify with the man who is working on the docks. If you got it, if you *really* identify with him, what you wear won't make a damn bit of difference. But if you talk differently, and somehow talk down to people, they can sense it. They can feel it. And they know whether you are talking *with* them, or talking *at* them, or talking *about* them.

If you feel that you are part of them and they are part of you, you don't say "I'm-a-part-of-you." What you really do is, you point out something. Especially the lower-class people, the people who'd felt the heel of oppression, see, they *knew* what you were talking about when you were speaking about when you talked about working at a job, doing the same work, and getting a differential in pay. And if your sense of being a part of them got over to them, they appreciated that. Somebody would get the point. Somebody would come out and say, "I'm gon' join that darn organization." As an example, I remember in someplace out of St. Petersburg, Florida, the first time I'd ever been to the Holy and Sanctified church. We had a good response. One lady came and all she could say was how my dress was the same as hers. Now, she didn't know how to deal with issues. But she identified. And she joined.

And then you have to recognize what people *can* do. There're some people in my experience, especially "the little people" as some might call them, who never could explain the NAACP as such. But they had the knack of getting money from John Jones or somebody. They might walk up to him: "Gimme a dollar for the NAACP." And maybe because of what they had done in relationship to John Jones, he'd give the dollar. They could never tell anybody what the program of the Association was. So what do you do about that? You don't be demeaning them. You say, well here is Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Susie Jones, and remember last year Sister Susie Jones came in with so much. And Sister Susie Jones would go on *next* year and get this money. Now, somewhere in the process she may learn some other methods, and she may learn to articulate some of the program of the Association. But whether she does or not, she *feels* it. And she transmits it to those she can talk to. And she might end up just saying, "You ain't doin' nothin' but spendin' your money down at that so-and-so place." She may shame him. Or she may say, "Boy, I know your mama." And so you start talkin' about what the mothers would like for them to do. So you do it because there's mama, mama's callin'. See, somewhere down the line this becomes important to them. At least these are the ways I saw it. And I think they respond.

Glossary

Holy and Sanctified church:	a reference to a denomination associated with the Pentecostal movement in Protestant Christianity
NAACP:	the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, a civil rights organization founded in 1909
prohibitive:	having the quality of creating a barrier to acceptance or use
Tampa:	referring to the city in Florida where race riots broke out on June 11, 1967
Tom Jones ... John Jones:	generic names, similar to John Doe

Image of Ella Baker, an African American civil rights and human rights activist. Retrieved from the The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights.



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