

### THREE MOVEMENT SAINTS

The Second Sunday After Epiphany/Martin Luther King Sunday, January 17, 2010

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As we celebrate Martin Luther King's birthday today, I want to introduce you to three people who worked closely with Dr. King and in significant ways made his ministry possible.

Look at this tall, handsome African American man. He was one of the most important leaders of the civil rights movement from the advent of its modern period in the 1950s until well into the 1980s. Because his work was almost always done behind the scenes, you may not recognize him. If you are old enough to remember the 1963 March on Washington at which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech, then you can thank Bayard Rustin because he was the chief organizer of that famous event which brought hundreds of thousands of people from all races and walks of life to our nation's capital to protest segregation and to move toward a truly open society.

His name is Bayard Rustin, and there are two reasons he is not as acclaimed as he should be. First, he was a member of the Communist Party until the Party made an abrupt about-face on the issue of segregation in the American military in the wake of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. He broke with the Young Communist League and sought out A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and at that time the leading articulator of the rights of African Americans.

The second reason you don't know Bayard Rustin is that he was gay, and when he was outed in 1953 homosexual behavior was a criminal offense in every state of the Union. Although the gay rights movement was still many years in the future, Bayard's conviction for public indecency and his relatively open attitude about his homosexuality set the stage for him to articulate his belief in the inherent dignity of African Americans and other oppressed people.

Bayard Taylor Rustin was one of eight children raised by Julia and Janifer Rustin of West Chester, Pennsylvania. They were actually his grandparents but when their daughter Florence gave birth to Bayard, they raised him as the youngest of the large Rustin family. He did not learn about any of his true heritage until he was in college. A gifted and successful student in the schools of West Chester, both academically and as a star on his high school football and track teams, Bayard went on to Wilberforce University, one of our nation's premier historically Black colleges.

Growing up in the American Friends, the Quakers, Bayard was entitled to do alternative service during World War II rather than serve in the armed services. But he found himself unable to accept the easy way out, given the fact that many young men who were not members of the recognized peace churches were receiving harsh prison sentences for refusing induction. In 1944 he was found guilty of violating the Selective Service Act and was sentenced to three years in a federal prison. There he faced vicious racism and frequent cruelty from the guards and some of the white prisoners for his nonviolent resistance.

On release from prison, he joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation and staged a journey through four Southern and border states in 1947 to test the application of the Supreme Court's recent ruling that discrimination in seating in interstate transportation was illegal. That journey earned him twenty-eight days of hard labor on a chain gang in North Carolina where he met with the usual racist taunts and tortures on the part of his prisoners.

After his sexuality became publicly known, Bayard had to leave the Fellowship of Reconciliation and he spent twelve years as executive secretary of the War Resisters League. He wrote for *The Progressive* magazine and a book entitled *Speak Truth to Power*.

In 1956 Rustin was approached by Lillian Smith, the celebrated Southern novelist who wrote *Strange Fruit*, to provide Dr. Martin Luther King with some practical advice on how to apply Gandhian principles of nonviolence to the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. That led him to become the chief architect of the August 28, 1963 March on Washington.

As we pray for the terribly beleaguered people of Haiti after the devastating earthquake there, it is appropriate that we remember the last years of Bayard Rustin's remarkable life. He worked in that country as well as Chile, El Salvador, Grenada, Poland and Zimbabwe to bring peace and democratic principles.

Throughout his life, Bayard Rustin's Christian faith as evinced through Quaker pacifism and compassion was unifying force in his life. He believed that there is that of God in every person, that all are entitled to a decent life, and that a life of service to others is the way to true fulfillment.

On February 1, 1960 a group of black college students from North Carolina A&T University refused to leave a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina where they had been denied service. The organizer of that first sit-in in our nation's history was this woman. Look at her: dignified, full of life and humor, intense. Do you see the sparkle in her eyes, the power of her personality, the force of her convictions?

This is Ella Baker, who was always addressed by the ministers and leaders of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference as Miss Baker. Inspired by the Montgomery bus boycott, she moved to Atlanta to help organize Martin Luther King's new organization. Dr. King initially resisted her abilities and forceful personality, but she insistently nudged him to reach out to ordinary people and to organize them. Like a lot of men who balk at taking advice from women, let alone direction, Dr. King wanted to preach and speak and be constantly on the move.

But Ella Baker was an organizer and Martin King came to see the importance of her abilities. She believed strongly in helping people to formulate their own questions, to define their own problems and to find their own solutions. Without Ella Baker's organizing abilities and compulsiveness the Southern Christian Leadership Conference would never have moved to the forefront of the civil rights struggle.

But her most significant contribution to the struggle was SNCC—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the cutting edge of the 1960s movement for civil rights. She constantly fought to make the voice of the ordinary person heard. She held firmly to the principle of group-centered leadership rather than a leader-centered group. You can imagine that among powerful male clergy she was often about as welcome as an early frost on a Georgia peach crop.

The young people of SNCC gave her the nickname “Fundu,” a Swahili word meaning a person who teaches a craft to the next generation.

Here is a woman who spent hours in pool halls, boot black parlors, bars and grills. She said that her job was to enlist the “uncouth” in the struggles of the NAACP, the SCLC and SNCC. She worked to bring the town drunk into the movement as well as the leading pastor. She was in essence a defender of the poorest of the community. Ella kept reminding the more comfortable members of the community that they were not immune to abuse, that they were obligated to stand up for the rights of the most vulnerable members of the community so that the rights of all would be protected.

In the often round-the-clock meetings of SNCC, Ella’s method was to sit silently until the opportunity arose to ask the probing question. Her technique was like that of Nelson Mandela who wrote in his autobiography, *Walk to Freedom*, “I have always endeavored to listen to what each and every person in a discussion had to say before venturing my own opinion.” Ella was like Mandela who characterized himself as a shepherd. “He always stays behind the flock, letting the most nimble go out ahead, whereupon the others follow, not realizing that all along they are being directed from behind.”

Do you see this white-haired, dignified Black man with the penetrating brown eyes and the ready smile? Look closely at the worry lines around his eyes and the deep creases in his forehead. He is obviously a man who has suffered for his faith but he is also one who has displayed an indomitable courage for over fifty years. Notice how upright he sits, how alert he is, how embracing is his smile. He is obviously a man of compassion and faith.

This man has undoubtedly had more influence on me than any other person in my entire life. Let me tell you a story. By the time I reached my final year in high school I had lived a more profligate and peripatetic life than most high school seniors. I had run away from home and joined the U.S. Army in my sophomore year, had to return to Carr Central High School in Vicksburg, Mississippi, to taunts and jeers, played quarterback on the football team again, then moved abruptly in the middle of the season to Pawhuska, Oklahoma, where I played tail back on a single wing team and won another letter. Thanks to some caring pastors and coaches and teachers, a lot of spiritual healing had occurred during all those trials and tribulations.

When I was elected president of the Oklahoma Methodist Youth Fellowship, nobody was more surprised than my friends. I was sort of like Lyndon Baines Johnson when he remarked after an especially fulsome

introduction, "I wish my Mama could have heard that; she would have believed it. And my Daddy would have been surprised." As a result of my election, I was sent to a training event at Mt. Sequoyah, Arkansas. On my way to the event, my 1946 Ford automobile caught on fire. By the time I replaced the battery cables, I arrived late at the mountain.

Upon my arrival, I was assigned half of a double bed. After the obligatory campfire and singalong that night, I returned to my room to find that my bed-mate was an African American man. This man. James Lawson. Imagine my chagrin. Fresh from Mississippi, now living in one of the most racist states in America, compelled to sleep with a Black man. Not only that: he had recently been released from prison. Jim Lawson was so deeply committed to pacifist Christianity that like Bayard Rustin he had refused even to register for the draft. As a result, he had spent eighteen months in a federal prison.

In that providential ten days together, Jim Lawson taught me about Jesus Christ, nonviolent resistance, the power of prayer, reliance on God's grace and will in ways that nobody before or since has influenced me. He had been a football star at Massillon, Ohio, high school and went on to Oberlin College where he answered God's call to ordained ministry. In his junior year Martin King came to speak at Oberlin and he and Jim cemented a deep Christian brotherhood.

When Jim Lawson moved to Nashville, Tennessee to attend Vanderbilt University Divinity School, Dr. King recruited him to organize what they hoped would be a decisive sit-in in that very Southern city. Jim recruited African American students from Fisk University, Vanderbilt and Belmont University. He trained them for months in the theology and tactics of non-violent resistance.

When they staged their sit-in in downtown Nashville and were arrested, Jim was kicked out of Vanderbilt. As a protest and support of Jim and the students, half the faculty of the Divinity School resigned their positions. Jim went on to graduate from the theology school at Boston University, was ordained and became pastor of Centenary Methodist Church in Memphis, Tennessee.

Memphis was then and is now a bastion of white racism and establishment. When Jim became one of the leaders of the sanitation workers' strike in 1968, the mayor of Memphis, the newspapers, the rich white folks who controlled the city and the white churches resisted, vilified, strategized against the underpaid garbage workers. Jim led marches, spoke at City Council meetings, held rallies, took his life into his hands—and put it in God's hands.

When he called his friend, brother in the faith and mentor, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to come to Memphis to rally the sanitation workers and the black pastors and laity, King came and gave his famous "I have Been to the Mountain" speech/sermon on April 3, 1968. You know the rest of the story: the next day when Dr. King was standing on the balcony of the motel in Memphis, he was assassinated by Jimmy Ray. Or somebody else. Or, as Jim Lawson believes, by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Subsequently Jim became pastor of Homan United Methodist Church in Los Angeles, California and now speaks and preaches all over the world. This modest, humble, self-effacing man is the key figure in David Halberstam's book, *The Children*, written about that first sit-in in Nashville. Jim Lawson is embarrassed when I call him a saint of the church.

In reality all three of these—Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker and Jim Lawson—are saints in the best understanding of that appellation. They are those who live faithfully, seek to do God's will, are motivated by trust in God's grace and struggle against the values of the world.

Their lives shine and illuminate the dark path which we must trod.