

Selections from

# The Long Haul

An Autobiography

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## From Chapter Ten, "Charisma" (pp. 120-125)

While some of the goals of the civil rights movement were not realized, many were. But the civil rights movement as it was then cannot and should not be imitated. It was creative, and we must be creative. We must start where Martin Luther King, Jr., was stopped, and move on to a more holistic world conception of the struggle for freedom and justice.

The only problem I have with movements has to do with my reservations about charismatic leaders. There's something about having one that can keep democracy from working effectively. But we don't have movements without them. That's why I had no intellectual problem supporting King as a charismatic leader.

I experienced the temptations of becoming a charismatic leader in 1937, when I took a leave of absence from Highlander and became a labor organizer for the TWOC [Textile Workers Organizing Committee] in McColl, South Carolina, and Lumberton, North Carolina. I made this change partly to see if I could do this kind of work and partly because I believed in the importance of getting people organized.

There was a long-drawn-out strike in Lumberton in which black people, Native Americans and white textile workers were out for two or three months. I was trying to keep the people's spirit up and give them something to do by having evening meetings in an outdoor lot near the mill, where we built a platform. In addition to getting some of the textile workers and their families who could make music to play and sing, I would have to do what they expected, which was to make a speech. There wasn't much else to occupy people while they were on strike. They didn't have any money to spend on entertainment. So we used to have at least a thousand people out every night, and I would get up and try to talk to them about the things I thought would be helpful. I talked about history, socialism, political action and cooperatives. I talked about events happening around the world. I had to think of something to talk about instead of just blasting out platitudes.

In the process of doing that, I learned how to hold the audience

and how to keep them coming back every night. It got to be a game: I'd say to myself, "I'll see if I can talk about the Soviet Union tonight without scaring them," and I'd do it by talking about Moses leading the children out of bondage, and I'd cast around for other stories I could tell. In the process of doing that (with the help of the opposition, which always enhances your situation), the people got more and more enthusiastic, and I got carried away with this business of having so much power. I justified it by telling myself they might be learning a little something and were being exposed to some new ideas, but I found myself being impressed by having a following. One night I got to thinking about this and said to myself, "This is scary. This is the kind of thing I don't believe in, this is dangerous. Even if it's doing some good for the people, it certainly isn't doing me any good, and it's a temptation." That's when I thought about the Lord's Prayer, which doesn't say, "Save me from doing evil," it says, "Lead me not into temptation." It's the temptation you've got to watch, and there I was being tempted by the power that comes from charisma. My speaking certainly wasn't developing local leaders.

We had all kinds of trouble during that strike. First, the company tried to start a company union, and then they tried everything they could think of to frustrate us. We were stalling for time to get the labor board to act, and they were very slow, so we had to keep the spirit up. I'd never been in a situation where I had to do that kind of thing to a thousand people every night. I tried everything to keep them interested. The highway patrolmen were usually there, and I'd always thank them and the police for escorting me out of my hotel. I used to give them my hand, but they'd sit there, refusing to shake it, heads down. I used all this stuff as if I thought they were doing everything for me, and the strikers just loved it.

You don't just tell people something; you find a way to use situations to educate them so that they can learn to figure things out themselves. One time I pointed out the reporter for the local paper who was always standing around. He just filled his stories with lies every day. I told the strikers, "Now you listen very carefully to what I say; then tomorrow you read what he says and see if there's any difference." Then that night I'd ask, "What did

you find out? What did he say?" I used all those things to educate people.

One day a fight broke out on the edge of the crowd and somebody called one of our strikers a bean eater. He shouldn't have gotten mad about it, because that's all he was eating—we didn't have any money for anything else. But the striker hit the heckler pretty hard and hurt him. A little scuffle broke out and it was stopped by our people. Neither one of them was arrested, but the next day I was indicted, charged with assault and battery, leading a mob and inciting a riot. I had been a block away on the platform. I was found guilty and sentenced to the chain gang. I appealed and in the meantime we settled the strike and got a contract. When I went back to court, the lawyer for the prosecution said they wanted to drop the case. "What do you mean, drop the case?" the judge asked him. "You've got witnesses here, and the defendant has been convicted in a lower court and sentenced to the chain gang. What do you mean, drop the case?" The lawyer said, "Well, the strike's been settled in the meantime." He admitted right there in court that the only reason for the case was the strike. It had nothing to do with the truth. I made sure there were a lot of workers in court so they could begin to learn how the system worked.

It was in that same strike that they tried to run me out of town. One Sunday at about four o'clock in the morning there was a knock at my hotel door, and a young fellow who was a theological student at the University of the South in Sewanee—he had been to Highlander, but I hadn't known he was in Lumberton—came in and said, "Myles, I have to see you." When I asked him what he was doing in Lumberton, he said, "Well, I'm a summer pastor at the Episcopal church here and I just have to talk to you. Tomorrow at eleven-thirty all the ministers in the mainline churches are going to pray that you're removed from this town. I just couldn't sleep, I had to tell you. They're determined to get rid of you."

To make a long story short, the communication lines to God broke down somehow, and I was still there the next day, so the mill owners decided they'd better try something a little more immediate and they hired some people to kill me. It sounds

dramatic, but if you know the labor movement at that time, you know people were killed. The killers came in the middle of the week to the busiest part of town during the busiest time of day, right across from the courthouse. One of the windows in my hotel room on the second floor looked out on the main street. All at once it was very quiet. I looked out the window and I couldn't see anything, couldn't see anybody. When I had gone out at noon to eat lunch, everything was just as busy as it always was. "Is this Sunday?" I asked myself. "This is the middle of the week, what's happening?" I went from window to window to see if I could figure out what was going on.

Then a car drove up under my window. I couldn't miss that car, because it was the only thing out there moving. There were four people inside, two in the front seat and two in the back. I just stood there and looked at them, and they looked up at me. Finally, one of them said "We're coming to get you."

"Fine," I said.

They nudged each other, took a swig of beer-they were taunting me, so I knew they were the killers. This was it. The week before, a Holiness minister who was one of the union leaders came to my room and asked me if I had a pistol. I told him I didn't, and he said, "Well, you know there are all these threats about. You'd better keep this pistol." It was a great big one, and I just put it in the drawer. "It's loaded, six shots," he told me, and he left some more shells. I hadn't fired a pistol in years. My wife, Zilphia, was a good pistol shot-she could put a cigarette out-but when I shot one, I had to aim at the side of a building if I was going to hit anything. I could use a rifle, but I had never learned to shoot a pistol.

I went over and got that pistol and walked to the window with it in my hand, and those four men looked at me and looked at each other. One of them said, "What good is that going to do?"

"Well, I'd like to talk to you a minute," I said. "You know I like to organize."

"Yeah, but your organizing days are over."

"Well, the last thing I'd like to do is to try to help somebody get organized." They laughed, and I said, "You know you guys need to get organized."

"Why do we need to get organized?" one of them asked.

"Well, somebody's going to come in this door," I said. "You're going to get the key down at the desk." The hotel was owned by the company. "You're going to come up here and one guy's going to open that door and come in. And," I said, "I'm going to kill the first person that comes in. Next, another person is going to come in and I'll probably kill that person. When the third person comes in, it'll be a toss-up whether I kill him or he kills me. And the last person, he'll be able to kill me. There's no question about that. You've got to decide which ones of you I'll kill. I don't have a problem-I'm going to be killed-but you've got to decide which ones of you are going to be killed."

Of course you always know that such people think like a mob.

They don't think individually. That's why the Klan is brave, that's why all mobs are brave. You've got to personalize it so they understand it's them. I asked one of the men in the front seat, "You have kids?"

"What's that to you?" he asked.

"Well, if you have," I said, "you don't want to die." I asked everyone if they had kids, and I held the pistol in my hand to emphasize the message, playing one against the other. I said, "Hey, you in the back seat. Are you going to be dead in a few minutes?"

Or are you the one who's going to have to haul this guy in the front seat home? What are you going to tell his wife when you get there?" I just kept personalizing it, going round and round individualizing so that they'd think of themselves.

Then I told them, "That's why you need to get organized. You've got to vote on who's going to die. Are you people in the front seat going to die, or are you two in the back seat going to be the ones? Or one in the front, one in the back? Who's going to die?" I never

asked, "Who's going to kill me?" I asked, "Who's going to die?"

They were sure they were going to kill me—that's why they were so brave—but they hadn't thought about themselves. In the meantime, I was standing there with this big old sheepleg (that's what we called those pistols), and I had the temptation to twirl it around as they do in the movies, but I was afraid I'd drop it. Finally they muttered to each other and just drove away.

From Chapter Twelve, "Workshops" (pp.153-157)

In the workshop itself, insofar as the leader has solidarity with the people in that circle of learning, the people understand that their problems are taken seriously. Care must be exercised that the circle is not broken. If someone says, "I'm personally upset because my organization won't do something," the workshop leader would try to shift the focus of the complaint from personal upset to the functioning of the organization, by saying, "Let's talk about what the organization isn't doing that you're upset about."

If someone else said, "I have problems with my family," we'd say, "Well, that's not what we're here to talk about in the workshop—not that the problem is unimportant—but this workshop is about dealing with segregation. Maybe later on after class we could get together and talk about that problem if you want to, but in the workshop we have to talk about things that concern everybody in the group."

The same things hold for people in the workshops if they want to give a communistic speech, a born-again Christian speech or a KKK speech. We'd say, "This is not part of the problem, not what we're talking about. There's a room available after the workshop where you can meet with people if they want to come and hear your speech. It's not what we're doing here."

In our workshops people can talk about anything that is

appropriate to the problem they come with. The limits of discussion have nothing to do with freedom of speech, but with keeping to the topic we agreed on beforehand. Within that topic you can talk from any point of view. A person can say, "As a Catholic I don't like this," or "As a Communist I don't like this," or "As a Klansman I don't like this," but you can't come and make a partisan speech. All of the participants, equally, can discuss what everybody else is discussing. There can be no discrimination within the topic, and it is the role of the workshop leader to keep the group to its subject.

Sometimes there were troubles. People would say to me, "You believe in freedom of speech. Will you let me come into the workshop and speak?" And I'd say, "You mean can you come in and take over this workshop when people have come here to talk about a specific problem? What you're insisting on would deny them *their* freedom of speech."

I recall a religious fundamentalist preacher who probably thought we were Communists, and he needed to come out and save us by warning the students against communism. He asked if he could give a speech.

Another time, a fine young man who had been working with Highlander joined one of the sectarian Communist groups, in this case a Maoist organization, and he had just seen the new day and had all the answers. He came out and said, "I have great news and I'd like to talk to people here about what's happening."

I asked him what had happened and he said, "Chairman Mao has just endorsed our party in the United States, and that means we can be the vanguard of the movement."

Then he asked me, "Aren't you impressed?"

"For an American radical party I would be much more impressed if a couple of factory workers endorsed your party," I said. "As far as speaking at Highlander, we have a workshop going and the people came here for that. It wouldn't be fair for them to talk about what only you're interested in. We're trying to build a program on what they're interested in."

Freedom of speech is essential, but license to keep other people from speaking is not freedom of speech. Highlander workshops have been guided by two principles: nobody can be discriminated against, for any reason, and there is freedom to say anything or take any position on the topic of the workshop. These conditions are understood beforehand by the participants. However, sometimes a person comes up with something that is not only off the topic, but is meant to provoke everybody else, get everybody upset and change the topic to his or her agenda.

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When Highlander workshops are described to people who haven't experienced them, it often sounds like we are always contradicting ourselves, because we do things differently every time, according to what is needed. We've changed methods and techniques over the years, but the philosophy and conditions for learning stay the same. There is no method to learn from Highlander. What we do involves trusting people and believing in their ability to think for themselves. Our desire is to empower people collectively, not individually.