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ELLA BAKER AND MODELS OF SOCIAL CHANGE

CHARLES PAYNE

Ella Jo Baker died in 1986. Her entire adult life was devoted to building organizations that worked for social change by encouraging individual growth and individual empowerment. Nonetheless, even among those generally knowledgeable about the modern history of the Afro-American struggle, neither her name nor her sense of how we make change are widely known. She worked during a time when few Americans were capable of taking a Black woman seriously as a political figure. Yet, Ella Baker was a central figure in Afro-American activism as an organizer and as an advocate of developing the extraordinary potential of ordinary people. Few activists can claim a depth and breadth of political experience comparable to Ella Baker's half-century of struggle. She was associated with whatever organization in the Black community was on the cutting edge of the era—the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) in the forties, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the fifties, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the sixties.

Miss Baker's activism—and she was always pointedly Miss Baker to the people she worked with, a mark of respect¹—was

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¹ Mary King, *Freedom Song* (New York: William Morrow, 1987), 43.

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strongly influenced by her family and childhood community. Born in 1903, she grew up primarily in rural North Carolina. She took pride in being from a family with a tradition of social consciousness. Her grandparents bought part of the land they had worked as slaves. She grew up hearing stories of slave revolts from her grandmother, who as a slave had been whipped for refusing to marry the man selected for her by her master. She described her grandfather as a Reconstruction-era activist, a man who tried to create a model Black community and who mortgaged his farm after a flood so that he could buy food for other families. Similarly, her mother and grandmother were independent women, central to the lives of their communities, the people to whom others turned in time of need.² Her mother was a talented public speaker and an ardent church worker active in local missionary societies. Ella later said, "I became active in things largely because my mother was active in the field of religion."³ Before she was out of grade school, Ella had acquired a local reputation herself as an effective public speaker.

She remembered the world of her childhood as a kind of "family socialism," a world in which food and tools and homes were shared, where informal adoption of children was taken for granted, a world with a minimal sense of social hierarchy "in terms of those who have, having the right to look down upon, or to evaluate as a lesser breed, those who didn't have. Your relationship to human beings was far more important than your relationship to the amount of money that you made."⁴ As an activist she self-consciously saw herself as a bridge across the sharpening social class divisions in the Black community.⁵ By her own interpretation, having been raised where there was a pervasive sense of community among Blacks "helped to strengthen my concept about the need for people to have a sense of their own value and *their* strengths and it became accentuated when I began to travel in the forties for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. . . . As people

² John Britton, "Interview with Ella Baker: June 19, 1968," Moorland-Spingarn Collection, Howard University, 4; Ellen Cantarow with Susan O'Malley, *Moving the Mountain: Women Working for Social Change* (Old Westbury, N.Y.: Feminist Press, 1980), 56–60; Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston: Beacon, 1965), 32–34.

³ Lenore Hagan, "Ella Baker Interview, March 4, 1979," Archives, Highlander Research and Education Center, New Market, Tennessee, 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁵ Cantarow and O'Malley, 68, 70.

moved to towns and cities, the sense of community diminished.”⁶ Looking for ways to reestablish among Blacks and other dispossessed groups the self-sufficiency and community of her youth was to be an important element in her thinking all of her life.

She was valedictorian of her class at Shaw University in 1922, and the administration was probably glad to see her leave; she had been protesting the school’s restrictive dress code for students and its policy of having students sing Negro spirituals for visitors. She wanted to go to graduate school to study sociology or to become a medical missionary, but the family’s financial situation would allow neither. Instead, she moved to New York where she could find only factory or domestic work. She refused to go into teaching since that was just what a Black woman with a degree was expected to do. Exactly how she first became involved in organizing is not clear—she says she left college with conventional notions of personal success⁷—but it is clear that the smorgasbord political environment of New York intrigued her. “And so wherever there was a discussion, I’d go. It didn’t matter if it was all men. . . . You see, New York was the hotbed of—let’s call it radical thinking. . . . Boy, it was *good*, stimulating.”⁸ Subsequently, the economic dislocations of the Depression played an important part in her rejection of “the American illusion that anyone who is determined and persistent can get ahead.”⁹

Between 1929 and 1932, she was on the editorial staffs of at least two newspapers, the *American West Indian News* and *Negro National News*. During the Depression, she became national director of the Young Negroes’ Cooperative League, which established stores, buying clubs that encouraged poor people to pool their purchasing power, and other cooperative economic ventures in Black neighborhoods. During the same period, she worked with a variety of labor organizations in Harlem, including the Women’s Day Workers and Industrial League, which focused on the problems of domestic workers. In 1935 Miss Baker herself pretended to be a domestic worker in order to investigate the employment conditions of Black domestics.¹⁰

Her organizing work in Harlem brought her to the attention of some people active in NAACP circles, and in 1941 she applied to

⁶ Ibid., 61.

⁷ Britton, 1.

⁸ Cantarow and O’Malley, 64.

⁹ Ella Baker with Marvel Cooke, “The Bronx Slave Market,” *Crisis*, no. 42 (November 1935), 340.

¹⁰ Cantarow and O’Malley, 63–64; Baker with Cooke.

the NAACP for a job as an assistant field secretary. The job involved extensive travel throughout her native South, raising funds, memberships, and consciousness, trying to get people to see the relevance of the organization to their lives and trying to help them work through their very real fears about being associated with the NAACP. She spent about half of each year organizing membership drives and new chapters in the South—Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Virginia—thus becoming exposed to a wide variety of leadership styles and organizational structures while making innumerable contacts with grassroots leadership, contacts that would become important in her work with the SCLC and SNCC.

In 1943 she became the NAACP's National Director of Branches. In what seems to be the pattern of her life, she was more in the organization than of it. She was a critic—not always a gentle one—of that organization's style of work. By 1941, she was calling the program "stale and uninteresting."¹¹ She thought the leadership was overly concerned with recognition from whites, overly oriented to a middle-class agenda, unaware of the value of mass-based, confrontational politics, not nearly aggressive enough on economic issues, and too much in the hands of the New York office.¹² She was particularly critical of the organization's tendency to stress membership size without attempting to involve those members more meaningfully in its program. She saw the organization as the victim of its own success. It was successful enough with its program of attacking the legal bases of racial oppression that its very success blinded the organization to its shortcomings. The legal emphasis meant that the huge mass base of the NAACP—400,000 by 1944—could not play a meaningful role in the development of policy and strategy.

She urged the organization to recruit more low-income members by, for example, sending organizers into pool rooms and taverns; her experience had been that some people would join up out of sheer surprise.¹³ The branches, she argued, not the national office, should be the focal point of struggle. "Any branch which says it has nothing around which it can build a program," she wrote, "is simply too lazy to concern itself with things on its own doorstep."¹⁴ While many of her recommendations were ignored, she was able in

¹¹ Ella Baker, "Report of Branch Coordinator," Papers of the NAACP University Publications (Frederick, Md., 1982), microfilm reel 5, frame 0547.

¹² Britton (n. 2 above), 11–12, 76–82; Harper, 21.

¹³ Untitled memo, NAACP papers, reel 6, frame 0654.

¹⁴ Ella Baker, "Conducting Membership Drives" (1942), NAACP papers, reel 11, frame 199.

1944 to initiate a series of regional leadership conferences. The conferences, one of which was attended by Rosa Parks, were intended to help local leaders search for more effective ways to attack local problems and at the same time see how local issues were, inevitably, expressions of broader social issues.¹⁵

She left the national office in 1946, partly as a result of having accepted responsibility for raising a niece and partly as a result of her conflicts with the organization's viewpoint.¹⁶ She worked for a while as a fund-raiser for the National Urban League and continued to work with the NAACP at the local level, becoming president of the New York City branch which, in her phrase, she tried to "bring back to the people" by moving the office to a location where it would be more visible to the Harlem community and by developing a program in which Black and Hispanic parents actively worked on issues involving school desegregation and the quality of education. For her, the point was that the parents work on the issues themselves rather than having civil rights professionals work on their behalf.¹⁷

In the mid-1950s, with Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison, she helped organize In Friendship, an organization that offered economic support for Blacks suffering reprisals for political activism in the South. This same group helped develop the idea of a mass-based organization to continue the momentum that came out of the Montgomery bus boycott. From that idea, developed by several groups almost simultaneously, grew the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The initial meeting of the embryonic SCLC was called by the Reverend C. K. Steele, one of the contacts Baker had made in the South, and it was the In Friendship group that encouraged Steele to call the meeting.

Levison and Rustin felt that the fledgling SCLC needed an experienced organizer and were able to talk a reluctant Ella Baker into taking the job. In 1957, she went south, intending to stay only a few weeks. She wound up staying two and a half years, becoming the first full-time executive director. At the beginning, she used to joke, SCLC's "office" was her purse and the nearest phone booth. She was responsible for organizing the voter registration and citizenship training drives that constituted the SCLC program

¹⁵ Hagan (n. 3 above), 21; Susan Thrasher and Casey Hayden, "Ella Baker Interview, April 19, 1977," Southern Oral History Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 49.

¹⁶ Thrasher and Hayden, 51; Cantarow and O'Malley, 74, 156.

¹⁷ Ella Baker, "Developing Community Leadership," in *Black Women in White America*, ed. Gerda Lerner (New York: Vintage, 1973).

during this period. She did this largely by exploiting the network of personal contacts she had developed while with the NAACP.¹⁸

As with the NAACP, she had trouble getting her own thinking reflected in the programs of the SCLC. She tried to get the leadership to go into some of the rural counties where Blacks were not voting at all. Prophetically, she tried, also without success, to get the organization to place more emphasis on women and young people, the constituencies that would soon carry much of the movement. Miss Baker's emphasis on women reflected her sense of how southern Black organizations worked. "All of the churches depended, in terms of things taking place, on women, not men. Men didn't do the things that had to be done and you had a large number of women who were involved in the bus boycott. They were the people who kept the spirit going [the women] and the young people."¹⁹ Being ignored was hardly a surprise to her: "I had known . . . that there would never be any role for me in a leadership capacity with SCLC. Why? First, I'm a woman. Also, I'm not a minister. . . . The basic attitude of men and especially ministers, as to . . . the role of women in their church setups is that of taking orders, not providing leadership."²⁰

Despite the difficulties, her association with SCLC put her in a position to help create and shape one of the most significant organizations of the sixties, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). When the sit-in movement among Black college students first began, Ella Baker, like several other adult activists, used her extensive contact list to help it spread.²¹ The sit-in phenomenon at the time was essentially a series of disconnected local actions. Feeling that the movement might be more effective with some coordination, Ella talked SCLC into sponsoring a meeting of activist students on the campus of her alma mater, Shaw University. From that meeting, held Easter weekend, 1960, evolved SNCC.

Adult civil rights organizations sent representatives to the organizing meeting with hopes of co-opting all that youthful energy. Three organizations—SCLC, the NAACP, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE)—wanted in on the action. The SCLC felt it had the inside track, since many SCLC leaders had worked with the student leaders and, after all, one of the SCLC staff

¹⁸ Britton, 33–34; Hagan, 63.

¹⁹ Eugene Walker, "Interview with Ella Baker, September 4, 1974," Southern Oral History Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 21.

²⁰ Britton, 34–35.

²¹ Aldon Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 201.

members was in charge of the organizing meeting.²³ They should have consulted with the staff member.

Miss Baker preferred that the students remain independent. Indeed, at one point she walked out of a staff meeting where strategies to bring the students into the SCLC were discussed.²³ In Raleigh, she reinforced the feelings of those students who saw traditional adult leadership as too accommodating and unimaginative; and SNCC remained independent.

By this time, Miss Baker had been working in the South on and off for almost twenty years. In its early years SNCC, like SCLC previously, had her contact network at its disposal. Thus, when SNCC's Bob Moses first ventured into Mississippi she was able to send him to Amzie Moore, a courageous older activist whom Baker had met years before, probably through In Friendship. Much of what would happen in that state for the next four years was predicated on the relationship between these two strangers whom she brought together.

By 1961 SNCC had become the kind of organization that Ella Baker had been trying to create for some years. It went into the rural areas that other groups were reluctant to enter, it was far more open to the participation of women and young people than the established civil rights groups, and it disdained centralization and bureaucracy and insisted that leadership had to be discovered and developed at the local level. Clay Carson notes that "Baker's notion of 'group-centered leadership' had taken hold among student activists, and they strongly opposed any hierarchy of authority such as existed in other civil rights organizations."²⁴

Baker was key in preventing an internal dispute from splintering the organization. By 1961 a split had developed between those who wanted the organization involved in voter registration work and those who wanted it to continue in the direct-action tradition in which it had been born. Ella Baker's advice was ordinarily couched in questions, but this time she interceded more directly, suggesting that the students compromise by developing programs in both areas.²⁵

Thus, she played a crucial role in creating and shaping a movement organization that set much of the direction and pace of struggle in the early sixties. Bernice Reagon notes that the struggle for civil rights was the "burning" struggle of the decade, the

²² Ibid., 216.

²³ Cantarow and O'Malley, 84.

²⁴ Claybourne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981), 30.

²⁵ Ibid., 41-42.

struggle that helped generate and give form to many of the era's battles for social justice.²⁶ In the same sense SNCC, even more directly than the other civil rights organizations, may be regarded as the "borning" organization, and it is difficult to see how SNCC as we knew it could have come into existence without Ella Baker.

Miss Baker continued to work with a variety of groups through the sixties and well into the seventies. With SNCC, she helped organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (FDP), a vehicle to give the poor of that state some political voice. She also helped organize the challenge FDP made at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. She had a significant influence on the early leaders of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), which in its early years adopted a style of work that duplicated the style she encouraged SNCC to adopt. Aldon Morris says she was the "mother" of the activist phase of both organizations.²⁷ She also influenced the political development of some young women, including Mary King and Casey Hayden, who were later influential in shaping the growth of the contemporary feminist movement.²⁸ She was involved with attempts to reform urban schools, with South African support groups, with Third World women's organizations, and attempts to organize poor whites in the South.²⁹ Hers was a wonderfully eclectic style. Whatever the form of the injustice, she was willing to oppose it.

The ideas which undergirded her long activist career do not seem to have changed substantially since the 1930s. If there is one idea that seems central to her approach, it may be the idea of group-centered leadership rather than leader-centered groups. "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."³⁰ In contrast to the more traditional conception of leadership as moving people and directing events, hers was a conception of leadership as teaching, a conception that changes the nature of what it means to be successful. How many people show up for a rally may matter less than how much the people who organize the rally learn from doing so. If the attempt to organize the rally taught them anything about the mechanics of organizing, if the mere act of trying caused them to grow in self-

²⁶ Bernice Reagon, "The Borning Struggle," in *They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee*, ed. Dick Cluster (Boston: South End Press, 1979), 38.

²⁷ Morris, 223.

²⁸ King (n. 1 above), 42-48, 59-62; Sara Evans, *Personal Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979), 52-54.

²⁹ Cantarow and O'Malley, 54-56.

³⁰ Baker, "Developing Community Leadership" (n. 17 above), 352.

confidence, if the organizers developed stronger bonds among themselves from striving together, then the rally may have been a success even if no one showed up for it. As she said, "You're organizing people to be self-sufficient rather than to be dependent upon the charismatic leader."³¹ If growth toward self-sufficiency is the point, then there may be times when people will have to be allowed to make "wrong" decisions, since making decisions and learning from the consequences are necessary to such growth. That was why Ella Baker tried to avoid exerting too much influence on the decision making in SNCC, for example. "Most of the youngsters had been trained to believe in or to follow adults. . . . I felt they ought to have a chance to learn to think things through and to make the decisions."³²

It follows that she had a poor opinion of centralized leadership, even if skillful and well intentioned.

I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed people to depend so largely on 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 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.³³

From her perspective, the very idea of leading people to freedom is a contradiction in terms. Freedom requires that people be able to analyze their own social position and understand their collective ability to do something about it without relying on leaders. "Strong people," she said in one interview, "don't need strong leaders."³⁴ "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. . . . People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves."³⁵

³¹ Britton (n. 2 above), 37.

³² Cantarow and O'Malley, 87.

³³ Baker, "Developing Community Leadership," 351.

³⁴ Cantarow and O'Malley, 53.

³⁵ Baker, "Developing Community Leadership," 347.

Whether people develop a sense of their own strength depends partly on the organizational context in which they are working. Ella Baker had misgivings about the common assumption that the bigger the political organization, the better, as well as the parallel assumption that rapid growth is always a sign of organizational vitality.³⁶ Large organizations more easily become antidemocratic, are not as likely to offer the kind of nurturing of individual growth that smaller ones can provide, and may be especially off-putting to members of low-income communities, where the predominant style of relating to individuals is still prebureaucratic. It is easy to forget that during most of the time when SNCC was at the forefront of the southern movement, the organization had only a few hundred very dedicated members. Part of what made that dedication possible, no doubt, was the organization's ability to generate a strong sense of community among its members in the early years. Its scale helped make that community possible, just as it helped each member of the organization to feel that his or her contribution mattered. It also seems that the decline of the organization was related to the sudden growth in the size of its membership after 1964. According to SNCC members like Cleveland Sellers and Mary King, the rapid growth led to the development of political factions and a general deterioration in the quality of relationships within the organization.³⁷

Mary King writes about how Ella Baker encouraged her political growth: "Periodically, Miss Baker would stop whatever Bobbi or I was doing and probe with a series of questions. With Socratic persistence, in her resonant and commanding voice, she would query, 'Now let me ask this again, what is our purpose here? What are we trying to accomplish?' Again and again, she would force us to articulate our assumptions. Sometimes I felt intimidated by her scrutiny."³⁸

Baker could be very intimidating indeed when she chose to be. That her persistent questioning could have such positive impact on so many young people is probably partly a reflection of her ability to appear nonjudgmental.³⁹ Though it is not impossible for such detailed attention to the intellectual growth of the individual to take place in large organizations, their scale certainly militates

³⁶ Britton, 79.

³⁷ Cleveland Sellers, *River of No Return* (New York: Morrow, 1973), 130–31; King (n. 1 above), 520.

³⁸ King, 60.

³⁹ See Joanne Grant, "Fundi: The Story of Ella Baker" (New York: First Run Films, 1981), videocassette, for a sense of the numbers of young activists influenced by Baker.

against it. On the other hand, if part of progressive politics is helping other people grow, no organization can be too small for that.

Ella Baker was much impressed by cell structures, including that of the Communist party. "I don't think we had any more effective demonstration of organizing people for whatever purpose."⁴⁰ She thought that one of the most sensible structures for change-oriented organizations would have small groups of people maintaining effective working relationships among themselves but also retaining contact in some form with other such cells, so that coordinated action would be possible whenever large numbers really were necessary.

Her awareness of the value of small organizations is part of a larger theme, a consistent concern for the well-being of particular individuals—not just the "community," or "Black people," or some other abstraction. Before a meeting she habitually tried to find out if anyone had a personal problem that needed attention.⁴¹ Her sensitivity to this kind of question may be partly a reflection of the fact that she was a woman, and quite self-consciously so, or a reflection of her rootedness in the highly personal culture of the South.

Her concern extended to the quality of relationships among activists themselves. Conflicts over the direction of the movement as well as purely personal conflicts were ongoing, of course, but Ella Baker was concerned that some of them were more destructive than they had to be. One of the reasons for this, she suggested more than once, was "the old business of groups that are better prepared to advocate their position sometimes engendering a defensiveness on the part of those who are less prepared."⁴² The real issues involved are then submerged under the resentment, and the losing side may withdraw or bide its time for revenge.

While not committed to nonviolence herself, she seems to have appreciated its value as a force for regulating behavior within the movement. Referring to the young people of early SNCC, she spoke approvingly of the fact that "they were so keen about the concept of nonviolence that they were trying to exercise a degree of consciousness and care about not being violent in their manner of judgement of others."⁴³

How shall we deal with the differences and disagreements among ourselves, real or imagined, without alienating one another? That question crops up repeatedly in Ella Baker's thinking, but it has received far too little attention from those concerned with social

⁴⁰ Britton, 81.

⁴¹ See "Fundis."

⁴² Britton, 57.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 94.

change, with the exception of some feminists. Products of the society we wish to change, we carry within ourselves some of its worst tendencies, including tendencies that will lead to self-aggrandizing and exploitative relationships. Once, in the context of an argument within SNCC over who had the right to participate in the movement, Baker said, "We need to penetrate the mystery of life and perfect the mastery of life and the latter requires understanding that human beings are human beings."⁴⁴ Unless we do a better job of responding to the human contradictions and weaknesses of the people we work with, we are likely to continue to create politics that are progressive in the ideas expressed but disempowering in the way individuals expressing those ideas relate to one another.

Group-centered leadership is leadership in which the ego needs of leaders are placed beneath the developmental needs of the group. It requires leaders who can deal nondestructively with their own need for recognition. Ella Baker held a special fear of the need of leaders for some sort of recognition from the larger society, seeing it as part of the pattern by which initially progressive American movements have traditionally been routinized.⁴⁵

Among Blacks she saw it as a distorting factor across several generations of leadership and across various ideological lines. Black radicals as well as Black moderates have allowed the desire to be recognized to blunt the thrust of their activism. Thus, in the NAACP of the forties and fifties, Ella Baker thought the thirst for recognition was one of the factors leading to accommodationist politics at a time when many of the members were ready for a more militant program. The thirst for recognition was also a problem for the radicals of the late 1960s, some of whom became so enamored of the coverage they were receiving from the press that they began performing for the press. As she saw it: "I think they got caught up in their own rhetoric. . . . To me, it is a part of our system which says that success is registered in terms of, if not money, then how much prestige and how much recognition you have. . . . So these youngsters with their own need for recognition began to respond to the press."⁴⁶ It is not difficult to imagine what media recognition must have done to the egos of the leaders involved or how it must have poisoned their relationships with other, less-recognized activists who were working just as hard, risking just as much, as the handful of media celebrities.

⁴⁴ Zinn (n. 2 above), 186.

⁴⁵ Britton, 11, 69.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

The distorting potential of media recognition underscores again the case for groups not being too dependent upon leaders. Part of the reason Ella Baker is not a household name is her conviction that political organizers lose a certain kind of effectiveness when they allow themselves to become media stars. Typically, at the conference at which SNCC was organized, she was at pains to put some distance between the students and the press, and in its early years none of SNCC's leading figures became media celebrities. We do not know whether that pattern was due in any measure to the influence of Ella Baker, but it is certainly consistent with what she advocated.

Miss Baker seems to have viewed the press as more useful in the process of mobilizing than in the process of organizing. The distinction between mobilizing and organizing was crucial for her. Organizing, according to Ella Baker, involves creating ongoing groups that are mass-based in the sense that the people a group purports to represent have real impact on the group's direction. Mobilizing is more sporadic, involving large numbers of people for relatively short periods of time and probably for relatively dramatic activities. What SNCC did in rural Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia was organizing. Activists went into a community committed to staying there for a period of time, trying to identify local leadership, strengthen it, and help it find ways to create organizations and programs that would help local people reach a point of development where they would no longer need to rely on SNCC or anything similar. The intention was to leave behind enduring organizations led by the people in whose name they were created, organizations like the Freedom Democratic Party in Mississippi and the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in Alabama. At least, organizing under this conception involves the creation of stable, ongoing relationships and of ongoing attempts at political education.

By way of contrast, what the SCLC did in Birmingham and Albany and elsewhere was mobilizing—going in for a matter of weeks or months, leading massive demonstrations aimed at bettering the conditions under which people lived, and then moving on. By its nature, mobilizing is more likely to be public and to be dependent upon generating appropriate publicity. The point is not that one or the other is more important historically—both are clearly necessary—but that they are two different political activities.

The distinction between organizing and mobilizing has become increasingly muddled. Young people looking back at the movement tend to see the mobilizing but not the organizing. They see the great demonstrations and the rallies and take that to be the

movement. They do not see the organizing effort, often years of such effort, that made the grand moments possible. They do not see organizers going door to door for months on end trying to win trust, overcome fear, and educate people to the ways the movement might connect with their lives. Cordell Reagon, one of the young SNCC organizers in the Albany, Georgia, movement remembers the early phase of organizing in that city as largely hanging around the student union talking to students, hanging around playgrounds, visiting people in their homes.⁴⁷ In general, Deep South organizing was a process of trying to become a part of the lives of the people one was trying to work with, and there was frequently nothing very dramatic about it.

Ella Baker understood the failure of the radical thrust of the late sixties as being partly a failure to continue the undramatic work of organizing. She thought that much of what Stokely Carmichael, for instance, was saying around 1968 was thoughtful and grounded in his many years of working to change the system. Then his ideas became a slogan for people who were less thoughtful and had done less work. The rhetoric, as Ella Baker said, got far ahead of the organization.⁴⁸ At least a part of what was missing was “a greater degree of real concentration on organizing people. I keep bringing this up. I’m sorry, but it’s part of me. I just don’t see anything to be substituted for having people understand their position and understand their potential power and how to use it. This can only be done, as I see it, through the long route, almost, of actually organizing people in small groups and parlaying those into larger groups.”⁴⁹ She was always dubious about the real value of demonstrations. Lobbying and demonstrations may produce some gains from the powers that be relatively quickly, but the same powers may retract those gains as soon as the political winds shift. What Miss Baker called “real organizing” might mean that results would take longer to achieve, but it might also mean these results would be better protected.

My purpose in writing this essay was to introduce the Grand Lady, as her grandfather used to call her, to people who may not have heard much about her way of working and thinking. That Ella Baker could have lived the life she did and remain so little known even among the politically knowledgeable is important in itself. It reminds us once more of how much our collective past has been distorted—and distorted in disempowering ways. What I know of

⁴⁷ Morris, 240.

⁴⁸ Britton, 67.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

Ella Baker's thinking does not strike me, and never struck her, as offering any complete set of answers, but I think it does offer a more promising way to begin framing questions about where we are and how we get to the next stage than the ideas of many activists who did become media figures.

One has to wonder how she sustained her involvement for so long. It is not difficult to imagine how much frustration was built into the work she chose for herself. Nowadays we tend to think that anyone who works for social change for a year or two has made an enormous sacrifice. In the few places I know of where she comments on this, there is a suggestion that she was sustained by the faith that her work was a part of something on-going:

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 new life as a result.⁵⁰

It isn't impossible that what those who came along with me went through, might stimulate others to continue to fight for a society that does not have those kinds of problems. Somewhere down the line the numbers increase, the tribe increases. So how do you keep on? I can't help it. I don't claim to have any corner on an answer, but I believe that the struggle is eternal. Somebody else carries on.⁵¹

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⁵⁰ Baker, "Developing Community Leadership" (n. 17 above), 352.

⁵¹ Cantarow and O'Malley (n. 2 above), 93.