

# TEN

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## *Charisma*

Back during the heyday of the civil rights movement in Mississippi, I met an older black woman who told me, "We've got a Citizenship School down here." I asked her what that was and she told me, "Well, you know, I go out and teach people to read so they can vote. I can read a little myself. . . ." And I said, "That's great, where did you get the idea?" She told me, "I figured it out, and then I taught three other women to do it." She had no idea that anybody else was doing the same thing. She'd probably been to a conference where somebody was talking about Citizenship Schools

and the idea was so simple, she could pick it up and make it her own.

It's only in a movement that an idea is often made simple enough and direct enough that it can spread rapidly. Then your leadership multiplies very rapidly, because there's something explosive going on. People see that other people not so different from themselves do things that they thought could never be done. They're emboldened and challenged by that to step into the water, and once they get in the water, it's as if they've never not been there.

People who work to create a decent world long for situations like this, but most of the time we are working with organizations. We cannot create movements, so if we want to be part of a movement when it comes, we have to get ourselves into a position—by working with organizations that deal with structural change—to be on the inside of that movement when it comes, instead of on the outside trying to get accepted.

When you're in an organizational period, which is most of the time, there can be many organizations without there being a movement. Organizations with nonstructural reform programs working to achieve limited goals can form alliances, but there's still no qualitative difference and no movement potential. During the civil rights movement, for instance, people came out of the labor movement, the black churches, the pacifist movement; people came who wanted social equality, and once the movement got under way, people who wanted to be where the excitement was were in it, people who wanted to get rid of their guilt were in it—it was so big that there was room for everybody.

A large social movement forces people to take a stand for or against it, so that there are no longer any neutrals. You've got to be on one side or the other. It's true that it forces some people to be worse than they would be, more violent than they would be, but it also forces some people to get behind the cause and work for it and even die for it. People have to understand that you can't make progress without pain, because you can't make progress without provoking violent opposition. If enough people want change and others stand in their way, they're going to force them out of the way. A revolution is just the last step of a social movement after it has taken a prerevolutionary form. Then it changes again—qualitatively—into something else. It's no longer a prerevolu-

tionary movement, it's a revolution that transforms social, political and economic structures.

When you are part of a social movement, you discover that everything is so dynamic that nobody can make fixed plans and schedules anymore. During the civil rights movement you could schedule a demonstration around demands in, say, Birmingham, but you couldn't predict the dynamic situation that might develop. While Martin Luther King, Jr., was trying to figure out whether children should be allowed to demonstrate in Birmingham—in addition to his concern for the children, he was afraid that if they demonstrated and got killed or beaten up, there would be criticism of the movement—news came on the television that the kids had started demonstrating. So Martin announced that the children were going to be involved. This is what happens in a movement, and it's not anything that the best of planners and thinkers can control.

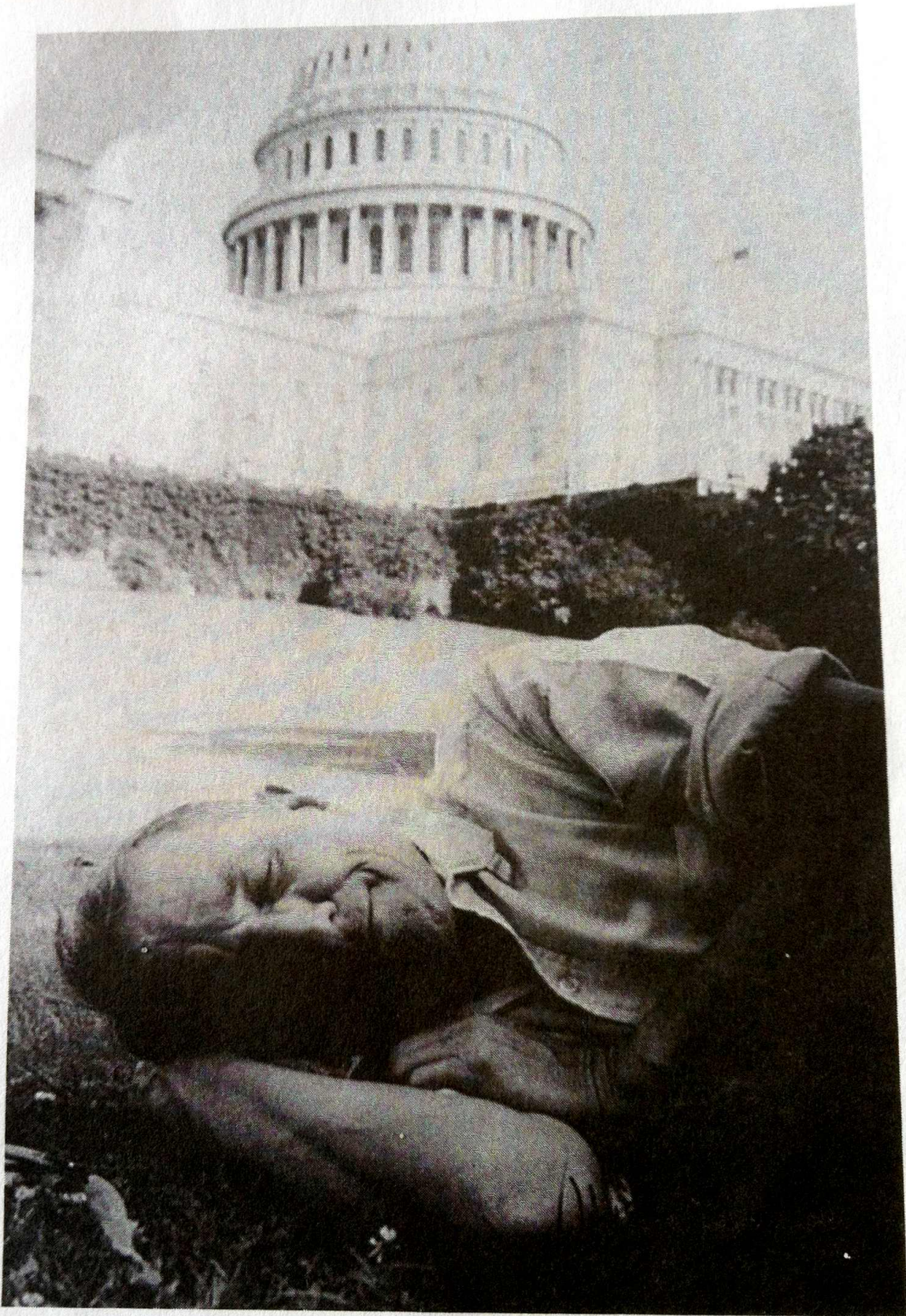
The job of Highlander was to multiply leadership for radical social change. The Citizenship School during the civil rights period is an example. It's been estimated that more than one hundred thousand people were reached by the Citizenship Schools. In my opinion, the truth is that nobody knows how many people were involved. They could have just said, "a helluva lot of people" and it would have been about as accurate. Social movements aren't subject to accurate record keeping. You can't reduce them to statistics.

In a social movement we are clearly part of a collective struggle that encourages us to increase our demands. One of the dynamic aspects of a social movement as opposed to an organization is that quite often in the latter, you'll bargain down to make concessions in order to survive. You have a limited goal, and you might say, "Well, we want to get ten street lights," and you'll get together and figure that you won't get ten, but you probably can get five. So you decide to tell them you want ten in order to get five. In a social movement, the demands escalate, because your success encourages and emboldens you to demand more. I became convinced that the seeds of the civil rights movement lay in the Montgomery bus boycott, because I'd seen the demands for fixed seating escalate to demands for blacks to be able to sit wherever they wanted. And then, when I saw the demands for blacks to be able to sit anywhere they wanted escalate into a demand for black drivers, I said, "This

is the beginning of a social movement." The ante went up and finally escalated into demands that they do away with all public segregation. The boycott had started with the demand for fixed seating so that when the white section was filled, the whites couldn't come and take the blacks' seats in the back of the bus. As the blacks became emboldened by their action, they demanded and got total integration of the buses.

The success of something like the Montgomery bus boycott feeds a movement. It feeds the hopes of the people and gives them courage. It makes them daring and makes them demand more. The demands were within the confines of political democracy and social equality, however, and did not extend to economic structures, as I hoped they would. It wasn't because Martin Luther King, Jr., and other leaders didn't know the importance of economic demands, but because they felt that the traffic wouldn't bear it, that it would be too confusing and might divide the movement. Their fears may have been well-founded. When King made the speech at Riverside Church in New York in which he came out against the Vietnam War, SCLC and its board members and other civil rights leaders felt that including peace issues would divide and weaken the movement. For example, Bayard Rustin, a leading peace crusader, came down to the SCLC convention and made a long speech trying to persuade the delegates to keep the peace movement and the civil rights movement separate. The debate continued at the board meeting. Martin didn't say a word. He listened for a long time, and then he got up quietly and said, "I think we've been getting off the subject. The subject isn't 'What Martin Luther King's going to do,' the subject is 'What is the Southern Christian Leadership Conference going to do.' I took a position against the Vietnam War as a minister of the Gospel, and it isn't subject to debate. The subject is the Southern Christian Leadership Conference position, not mine." The board chairman just looked like he'd been hit with a sledgehammer. He stood there, stunned, because like everybody else he realized that what they were voting on was whether the SCLC should continue with or without King. As soon as that was clear, it didn't take them long to decide that they were going to incorporate opposition to the Vietnam War into their program. It was a powerful demonstration of King's integrity and his commitment to what he believed was right.

When I tried to get King to include economic democracy as a



Myles Horton, 1968, a moment of rest during the Poor People's Campaign, Resurrection City, Washington, D.C. *Mike Clark. Courtesy Guy and Candie Carawan.*

major demand, he didn't disagree that it was important, but he didn't think the time had come to make it a major issue.

Speaking at Highlander's twenty-fifth anniversary in 1957, less than two years after the movement got started, young Dr. King called on us to be "maladjusted"—to the evils of segregation, to the madness of militarism and to the tragic inequalities of an economic system that takes necessities from the many to give to the few.

Eight years later he was still advocating maladjustment to an unjust system. Speaking to a church group in 1964, he elaborated on the maladjustment theme and proposed a new world organization, "the International Association for the Advancement of Creative Maladjustment for men and women who will be maladjusted."

Later on he accepted the challenge to strike at the roots of the main source of violence—poverty itself. His campaign against world poverty would be the acid test of his belief in nonviolence. King envisioned combining the civil rights struggle for political rights and reforms of existing institutions with a revolutionary struggle to restructure the entire society.

At the time he was killed, he was meeting with the Memphis Sanitation Workers in their strike for dignity and a living wage. For months he had been making plans for a nationwide campaign against poverty. Economically deprived blacks, Native Americans, Hispanics and white Appalachian poor would march on Washington, D.C., and establish what would come to be called Resurrection City. Following a planning meeting for this Poor People's Campaign, I wrote Andrew Young:

I believe we caught a glimpse of the future at the March 14, 1968 meeting called by SCLC. We had there in Atlanta authentic spokesmen for poor Mexican-Americans, American Indians, blacks, and whites, the making of a bottom-up coalition . . . Martin, and those of you close to him, will have to spearhead the putting together of grassroots coalitions for the Washington demonstrations. This could lay the groundwork for something tremendously exciting and significant. Just as it is fitting for SCLC to make ending the war in Vietnam a basic part of the program, it would be fitting now, it seems to me, for SCLC to provide leadership for a bona fide coalition. No other organization has this opportunity and therefore, this responsibility.

King evidently judged that the time had come for a major societal change and that massive nonviolent, transforming action was called



Highlander's twenty-fifth anniversary, 1957. Martin Luther King, Jr., Pete Seeger, Charis Horton (Myles' and Zilphia's daughter), Rosa Parks, Ralph Abernathy. *Highlander*.

for. His experience and dedication to justice had radicalized him and given him new insights. His actions and his visions of uniting all the poor confused some of his followers, just as had his earlier opposition to war, but as always, he acted on his convictions "as a preacher, a man of God." He saw racial injustice as part of a larger problem and civil rights as part of a human rights struggle, including the right to life itself. Martin Luther King, Jr., was no longer saying that the poor can stop being poor if the rich are willing to become even richer at a slower rate. By 1966 he was saying, that for years

he had labored with the idea of reforming the existing institutions, a little change here, a little change there, but that now he felt quite differently. He had come to believe that it didn't do much good to be able to enter an integrated restaurant if you don't have the price of a hamburger.

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.

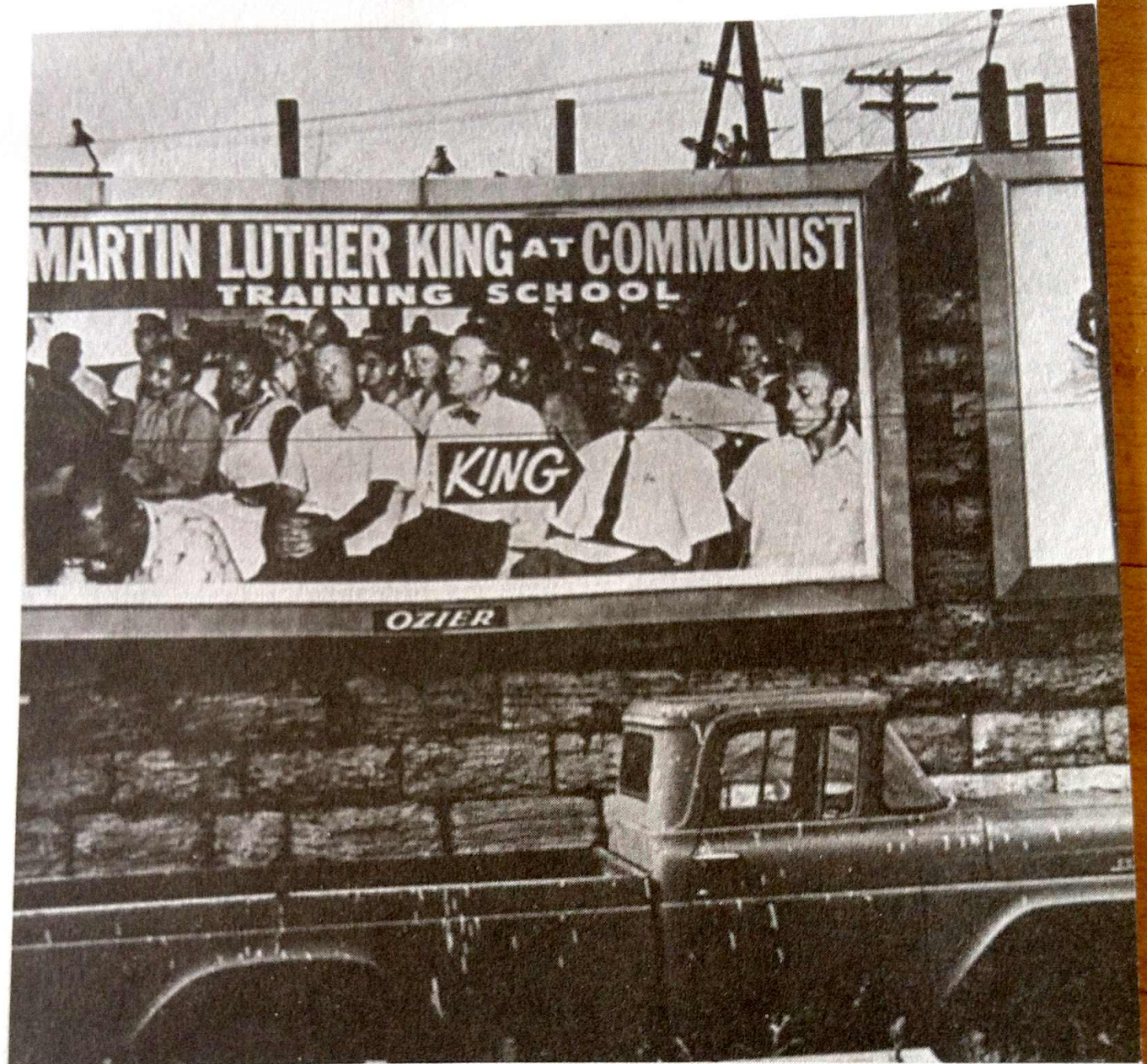
The only problem I have with movements has to do with my reservations about charismatic leaders. There's something about having one that can keep democracy from working effectively. But we don't have movements without them. That's why I had no intellectual problem supporting King as a charismatic leader.

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 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





Billboard using photo from Highlander's twenty-fifth anniversary in 1957. *Highlander*.

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.

Several years earlier when I was organizing the unemployed and the timber workers in Grundy County, I had had a related experience. I was driving through Altamont, the little county seat, and saw an old country store with three or four people sitting on the porch. When I passed by, they shouted at me, "Get out of town, you son of a bitch."

Well, I was going to have to come back down there and have some meetings, so I thought I'd better settle right there and not let it grow. I purposefully drove about a block beyond the store—I didn't slow down or anything—then I stopped, and backed up tortuously slowly. It took a long time, since I was just barely moving. As I inched my way there, I could see the men in the mirror. I didn't know what was going through their minds, but I wanted to get them worrying. I backed up and pulled up to the porch, but I didn't get close enough, so I backed up and pulled up again. I did two or three more maneuvers until I got as close as I could. Then I leaned out of the car and asked, "Did somebody speak to me?"

"No . . . no . . ."

"I thought I heard somebody. Hey you, did you speak to me?"

"No no no." They all denied it.

"Well, I must have been mistaken. Sorry to disturb you." I just drove on. That ended that—nobody ever hollered at me again in that town. Now, what did they think I could do? Three or four men sitting there, all of them as big as I was, what could I have

done? Nothing. They could have come out and beat the hell out of me. They were thinking like a group. When I looked them in the eyes, they couldn't do it. I individualized the situation. That was what was behind the event in Lumberton.

I was still worried about my problems with charisma, but fortunately the strike in Lumberton was over. I told myself that it was time for me to get back into a situation where I wouldn't have any more of this temptation. I was very concerned about what it did to me, and I made myself a vow to continue as an educator instead of as an organizer.

That kind of experience and that kind of background made me very critical of people who were only charismatic leaders, but although Martin Luther King, Jr., was a charismatic leader, he wasn't just a charismatic leader; he was many other things.

King came out of a black church tradition where charismatic ministers are the norm. The ministers who have the big churches and are powerful influences in the black community are for the most part charismatic leaders, so this was a natural role for him. Because of his vision and because his vision involved hundreds of thousands of people, he didn't have the problem that somebody who only makes charismatic speeches or sermons has. He had many other roles and was tied into a reality that was much larger than a particular church. To characterize him solely as a charismatic speaker would be misleading and untrue.

Nevertheless, he was so impressive in this role that he cast a shadow over less able speakers and activists, who had the tendency to say, "Let Martin do it, Martin can do it so well, he can be the voice." And Martin accepted that role, although he might not have welcomed it.

I remember we used to have meetings and talk about strategy and discuss plans; somebody would come up with an idea, and Martin would ask different people what they thought. We'd arrive at some kind of consensus, and he would say, "Give me a couple of days to Martinize it and we'll do it."

Now what he really meant was to make the idea his own, so that when he spoke, it would carry with it all the power of his charisma. For some it was a privilege to contribute ideas that he might use, but those people who wanted to be leaders and have their names known felt overshadowed. Sometimes they got discouraged, because the tree was too big and too dense for undergrowth.

One of the criticisms I made to him was "You are so much the powerful leader that it's hard for people who work with you to have a role they can grow in. You could spend time making room under the tree and developing other leaders to take on some of the responsibilities."

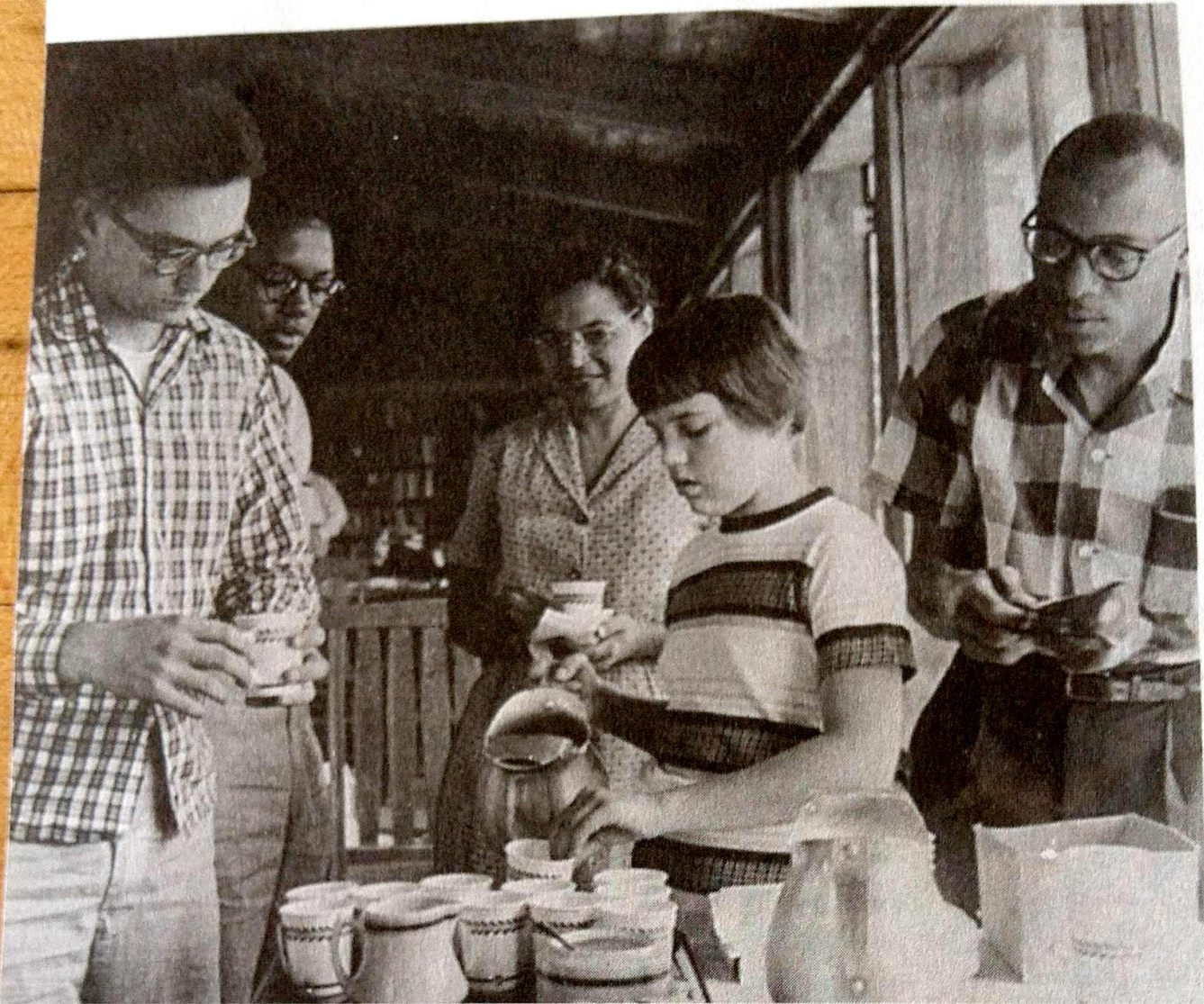
Martin would say, "In my mind I know that has to be done, and it is happening," but from my perspective, it looked as if he had never developed anybody who could take his place after he was killed. Although there were a lot of people whose leadership was developed, they weren't widely known, and the lesser-known people who would have been the most competent to take over the Southern Christian Leadership Conference were not known well enough.

The best his replacements could do was try to create carbon copies of him, not become leaders in their own right. When it came to original thinking and being creative, people would say, "Well, what would Martin have done?" and try to do the same thing. To me, this was a great weakness in the movement. My point is that he never did get around to really doing what he knew was needed. I think that's a very difficult thing for a charismatic leader to do.

One thing I especially like about social movements is that even though they throw up charismatic leaders, most of the people who are part of them can learn to be educators and organizers. Highlander was able to play a role in developing educators because we were asked to do the educational work by both SCLC and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). We trained the people who ran the Citizenship Schools and the voter registration drives, the noncharismatic people. That was when I learned, just as I had in the earlier industrial union period, that educational work during social movement periods provides the best opportunity for multiplying democratic leadership.

There is another important thing that social movements do: they radicalize people. That is, people learn from the movement to go beyond the movement. It may only affect a minority of the people, but there are so many people involved that thousands of them get radicalized. It might take a lifetime of nonmovement time to get that many people radicalized. So, if you had it within your power, you'd have one social movement after another.

When I say "radicalized," I'm talking about what happens to people who, through an experience of being part of a social move-



Desegregation workshop, coffee break, 1955. Charis Horton (center, front), Rosa Parks, students. *Highlander*. Emil Willimetz.

ment, understand that they must change the system. Now for years we had listened to pundits telling us we'd never do away with segregation, that people wouldn't change in our lifetime. But they did change.

What the pundits really meant was that you couldn't, through mere discussion, persuade people to have a change of heart and to give up their biases. I agree. But the civil rights movement started forcing people to change their actions. They were forced to change by mass demonstrations and boycotts and by blacks saying, "We're no longer going to take this, you're going to treat us like human beings, and we aren't going to wait through years of you changing



your minds, changing your hearts, we're going to change them right now! We're going to march down that street, go in that restaurant, we're going to ride that bus. We're going to get action!"

People were forced to adjust their minds to what they had to do. And their hearts came poking along later. That's what a mass protest can do. It did change things, so the very people who said, "The South will never . . ." had to rationalize why they were willing to continue this way. And pretty soon, they said, "Well, we might as well get with it. The kids have to go to school, we can't keep on being racist, and talking about it around our kids." And so it moved people forward. Everybody profited. No question about it.

Any change from a place where you can be put in jail for being decent is a big change; a change from the fact that a black restaurant owner would be jailed or have his license taken away from him for serving a white, and a white restaurant owner would lose his for serving a black—now, that's progress, and it's measurable progress. That isn't to say it goes far enough, and that you don't have to fight constantly to keep those rights. Right now there are organized attempts to take them away. But it does say, for the time being, that we've made a step forward. There's been a structural change in the South's society that will never allow people to go back to where they were. The South will never again have a law saying that black people and white people can't eat together. Or go to school together. There will be all kinds of fudging and adjustments, but there has been a structural change that will be difficult to reverse.

The people who've been radicalized by their participation in a movement have taken that experience and asked, "What next? We didn't go far enough, we've got to have economic changes, we have to make further political changes, we have to change the structure of society, we have to have a different kind of system." If they only start down that road, then I say those people have been radicalized by being part of a social movement.