

BAYARD RUSTIN

He is white-haired, a man of elegant diction, an old lion of the Movement, and he was the first of the Eastern civil-rights professionals to discover the young black preacher in Montgomery. Now, two decades later, he sits for an interview on the carpeted steps of a drafty stairwell of Ebenezer Baptist Church. Cold winds sweep in from Atlanta's Auburn Avenue, where King was born and grew up under his father's stern hand. Rustin has just spoken from King's old pulpit in a service commemorating what would have been the preacher's forty-fourth birthday. The speech marked the end of a long estrangement from his old allies in the Southern Movement. After a decade of the closest cooperation, Rustin in 1966 had opposed as bad strategy King's plan to bring Southern organizing tactics into the big-city ghettos. "I was against his moving into Chicago and I was against the Poor People's Campaign, and only now, because of that, has Coretta felt she could invite me back to speak. People were very disappointed that I, who had supported every move Martin [pauses, breaking off]—but I honestly couldn't do it."*

His affection for King has survived that old disagreement, and it is an affection untainted by the jealousy which so often afflicts gifted men who ally themselves with a man of even greater talents. This was evident when

*King's widow.

he addressed the Movement veterans gathered in Ebenezer that day. "Thank God I was in that struggle with him," he said, "for like you, I will now be a footnote to history."

Well, my meeting with Dr. King came about because I at that time worked for an organization called the Fellowship of Reconciliation. It was a pacifist organization. One of the board members of the Fellowship of Reconciliation was Lillian E. Smith,* the writer from Georgia. I got a telegram from her saying that she felt since I had worked with the Gandhi movement in India, that it would be a good idea for me to go to see Dr. King because he was a young man and he had not had great experience in handling nonviolent tactics. I talked to some people in New York and got a leave of absence from my job to be able to shuttle in and out of Montgomery to work with Dr. King.

One of the most amazing things was that when I got there, Dr. King was out of town, and I went to stay with Rev. Abernathy for two days until he returned. And when Rev. Abernathy took me over to the King household to introduce me to Coretta and Martin, I discovered that I'd known Coretta since she was in the 12th grade and I had lectured at the school she went to. And this, of course, immediately made a relationship. Dr. King asked me if I would help, and I did such things as help compose songs, prepare literature, do telephoning for him, and finally discovered that he was very simpatico to discussing the whole question of nonviolence.

Now, quite contrary to what many people think, Dr. King was not a confirmed believer in nonviolence, totally, at the time that the boycott began. On my second visit there the house was still being protected by armed guards. In fact, when I went in, I went in with a chap whose name was Bill Worthy, who became famous because he went to China contrary to the government's desire and they took his passport. He'd been a Nie-man fellow at Harvard and was well known. As Bill went to sit down in the King living room, I said, "Hey, Bill, wait!" I said, "There's a gun in that chair." And he might have sat on it. But it was gradually over several weeks that Dr. King continuously deepened his commitment to nonviolence, and within six weeks, he had demanded that there be no armed guards and no effort at associating himself in any form with violence. . . . I take no credit for Dr. King's development, but I think the fact that Dr. King had someone around recommending certain readings and discussing these things with him was helpful to bring up in him what was already obviously there. That's how we met.

*Miss Smith, who died in 1966, wrote the antilynching novel *Strange Fruit* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1944). She was one of the first Southern whites to support publicly the work of Dr. King.

Did you actually go as a leap of faith, without making the contacts? . . .

Well, what I did was to talk to some people in New York and say, "Now, I'm a Northerner and I have a left-wing political history." And I called in eight people including Jim Farmer and Mr. Randolph* and John Morsell of the N-Double-A-C-P, and I said, "Do you think I will harm the movement?" and they said, "Look, people are going to call names, say miserable things no matter who goes, so you're needed, go."

Now, I didn't contact Martin before I came because I really came to find out whether he could use me, whether he needed me, and the first thing I did when I went there was to tell him all the reasons why I perhaps ought not to come. Martin was never moved by stories and ugliness, so he said, "Look, we need everybody who can come to help us."

Could you give me some detail about your day-to-day work in the boycott?

I was kind of a Jimmy Higgins.** I would help set up the mass meetings. I would do writing chores for him. I would help answer the mail that was piling in. I would have discussions with him. I would help plan what was happening at the meetings. I would telephone key people all over the country urging them to come in, because obviously the fact that important people from all over America were coming to see this was a great psychological boon to the people who had to put up with walking to work, losing jobs, wondering whether they'd ever win. And then, of course, I was a singer and I wrote songs and they were topical about what was happening, and Abernathy would usually introduce them. I discovered also something that many people didn't know. King would very often address the mass meetings using such words as "agape" and "theory," and outline the various forms of love and this sort of thing. Abernathy had a great knack of saying, "Now, let me tell you what that means for tomorrow morning." And then he'd tell them what the plans were for the next morning.

*A. Philip Randolph, who Rustin believes influenced the Montgomery movement from afar: "One of the reasons E.D. Nixon would have taken the initiative in asking people to take some form of direct action is that as far back as 1941 he had been the regional director of Randolph's Southern operation, and consequently, he had been in many marches and demonstrations with Randolph. . . . So that in a sense, Martin Luther King was to some extent a spiritual godchild of Randolph. There was a very, very profound connection, and it was Randolph who raised the funds for me to go down after Lillian Smith sent the telegram."

**An all-purpose aide.

Was there an awareness on the part of Montgomery officialdom of your presence?

There was not only awareness of my presence, but I woke up one morning to find a twelve-by-twelve-inch photograph on the front page, that you might look up sometime in the *Montgomery Advertiser*, in '55, under which it said, "Who is this man? He's wanted for inciting to riot." And I'll never forget that Dr. King whisked me out of town in a car, with a car in front and a car behind, to Birmingham. And then when I returned to Montgomery after that, I actually spent some time not upstairs but downstairs doing certain things that he wanted done just so I wouldn't be taken out of circulation.

You came to Montgomery, of course, as a veteran in the field of civil rights. Can you tell me something about your initial feelings about Dr. King and what was going on there?

It's a very curious thing, and I very seldom would dare to say such a thing, but when I got to know Martin well, I said to him one day, "Martin, I have a feeling that you had better prepare yourself for martyrdom, because I don't see how you can make the challenge that you are making here without a very real possibility of your being murdered, and I wonder if you have made your peace with that." And I also told him that I could feel something in him that was akin to what one felt in the Gandhi circle. There was a—well, I quoted a Negro spiritual and I said, "I have the feeling the Lord has laid his hands on you and that is a dangerous, dangerous thing." And Martin did not take that very seriously at the time. But two years before his death, I think he very profoundly felt that he was going to be killed, and I don't think there was any paranoia in this. If a man is running you down the street with two guns and two knives, you can scarcely be called paranoid.

I remember on some occasions Dr. King and I would cosign letters that were going out for urgent appeals when things were tough, and particularly to keep the money to feed the people who were getting fired and to find transportation for many other people around the city, which required a great deal of upkeep of cars, and petrol and the like. But, of course, the great bulk of the money, in terms of the number of contributions, came from those nightly collections that the people who were walking put on the table. They were not sitting around waiting for someone to support them. This boycott was for them a complete and total proposition.

One of the most fascinating experiences I had after I had been down there about two weeks working. An elderly Negro woman called me and

she said, "You seem like a nice young man." I wasn't very young. She said, "And Dr. King is a young man. Perhaps you can really help him see the truth. You know, I've been around a long time. These Negroes in Montgomery are never going to stick together. They're going to run downtown and tell the white folks everything we're doing, and Dr. King is headed for getting a lot of colored people hurt, and I wish you'd tell him so." And I said, "I can understand you saying this, but I don't think that's going to happen. Some of us may get hurt, but you can't do anything without taking that chance." And she shook her head and walked away. Now that woman became one of the most vital people in a couple of weeks.

What Dr. King delivered to blacks there, far more important than whether they got to ride on the bus, was the absence of fear, the ability to be men in the same way that the Jews in the Warsaw ghetto knew that they couldn't win, but, knowing they were going to die, they said, "Let us go down expressing our manhood, which is to fight back." So Dr. King had this tremendous facility for giving people the feeling that they could be bigger and stronger and more courageous and more loving than they thought they could be.

In fact, when the Ku Klux Klan marched into Montgomery and we knew they were coming, Dr. King and I sat down and thought it over. And we said, "Ah! Tell everybody to put on their Sunday clothes, stand on their steps, and when the Ku Kluxers come, applaud 'em." Well, they came, marched three blocks, and unharassed, they left. They could not comprehend the new thing. They were no longer able to engender fear.

In the black community, going to jail had been a badge of dishonor. Martin made going to jail like receiving a Ph.D. But more important, the blacks of Montgomery were basically a religious people, and when Martin would say to them, "As sure as Moses got the children of Israel across the Red Sea, we can stick together and win," he had this ability to communicate victory, and to let everybody know he was prepared to pay for victory.

In this connection Martin did not need to be a strategist or a tactician. His Southern victories were made in part because Southern reaction provided a great dynamism. All right, they used fire hoses. This *draws* people in. [With broad gestures, a dramatic voice] They bombed churches. This *draws* people in. They murdered some kids in Mississippi. This *draws* people in. If the Southerners had been smart and just let Martin alone . . . but Martin had a facility for putting to good use the mistakes of his adversaries. And this is a King ability. It is almost impossible that Daddy

King could have gone through what he has gone through and still be a sane man, particularly after seeing your wife murdered in your own church, playing an organ.* But the Kings all have this inner grace, and I'm not adding anything to them that they do not possess. *It's there.* And this inner grace is a part of this religious confidence that if you do the right thing, you must leave the rest to God. So Martin said to me, "It is not for me to say or for you to analyze whether I can win, my obligation is to do the right thing as I am called upon to do it. The rest is in God's hands."

Do you think . . . he retained that fundamentalist's sense of an active, personal God?

Oh, yes, profoundly, and I was always amazed at how it was possible to combine this intense, analytical, philosophical mind with this more or less fundamental—well, I don't like to use the word "fundamentalist"—but this abiding faith. Now, Gandhi had some of this, also. Few men have this. Gandhi, like Martin, was really a spiritual intellectual.

You mentioned your sense of Dr. King's martyrdom or the possibility of it. Rev. King, Sr., during this time, was very concerned about this. . . . Did you ever discuss that with him?

Yes. There was a time when Papa King said to me, "I wonder if Martin should continue in this struggle. His house has been bombed, he has these small children, perhaps he is paying as much a price as he ought." Now dealing with this father-and-son relationship, I had sense enough to let him talk and keep quiet, and I raised some religious questions with him, and he said, "The difference between me and Martin is that Martin perhaps has more faith than I have." This, of course, proved not to be true. Oh, he was deeply concerned about this. I remember once in Montgomery, Martin and his father, Coretta, and I had a prayer session in which his father was deeply concerned to get God's guidance as to how he should advise his son. And Martin, after the prayer meeting, said, "You know, I will have to pray this through myself," and he thanked his father for his concern. And I think this was a very great moment in Martin's life because I think to a certain extent he had been up to that point a little too influenced by what his father thought. And I thought that somehow that day I was sitting through a liberating process.

*In 1974 Mrs. Martin Luther King, Sr., was shot to death by a deranged black man as she played the organ during Sunday services at Ebenezer Baptist Church.