

## THE BLACK WOMAN IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS STRUGGLE THE LONG VIEW

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. . . Perhaps because I have existed much longer than you and . . . maintained some degree of commitment to a goal of full freedom, that this is the reason Vincent Harding invited me to come down as an exhibit of what might possibly be the goal of some of us to strive toward, that is to continue to identify with the struggle as long as the struggle is with us.

I was a little bit amazed as to why the selection of the role of black women in the world. I just said to Bernice Reagon that I have never been one to feel great needs in the direction of setting myself apart as a woman. I've always thought first and foremost of people as individuals. . . . This does not preclude the idea that as individuals who happen to be males or who happen to be females in a world that has been dominated by males that there are not problems and situations that we are going to have to deal with even more pointedly than here-to-fore on the question of the black woman, or the question of the woman in a world that is in constant change.

### **Slavery and Reconstruction: There Were Many Forms of Resistance**

. . . . I'm sure all of you are well aware that the freedom movement has been and is as old as the existence of black people on this continent. . . . [and] wherever there has been struggle, black women have been identified with that struggle. . . . Even in coming across on the slave ship, among those who were resisting enslavement were women. They were treated with the same ruthlessness that the men who resisted were treated. In the period during slavery there was

a tremendous amount of resistance in various forms. Some were rather subtle and some were rather shocking. One of the subtle forms would be that of fainting illness.

I had the privilege of having known my maternal grandmother who was an ex-slave. She reminded me of one of her forebearers who was called "stracted Mary." . . . It meant that she was distracted. They called her crazy because after Mary had done what she considered her share of the chopping in the corn or cotton field, she'd just refuse to chop anymore. When the overseer would press her, she would act as if she was crazy and run after him with the hoe. This was her resistance to slavery.

. . . My grandmother . . . was the product of an octoroon and her white master. She was a very light woman, and as such in the pattern of the day, the light slaves were taken as house girls and carriage boys or carriage men. Her mistress . . . wanted her to marry a certain man we knew as "Uncle Carter." But my grandmother was in love with a man who was very, very dark, . . . known as Mitchell. When the order came for her to marry, she refused and as a result was ordered whipped. She was the daughter of her master . . . [however, and he] refused to whip her. Instead he sent her to work as a plowman in the low grounds by the river. She recalls the stories of getting up early in the morning and having to warm her hands under the horses' belly in order to keep going. But to show her defiance, she insisted that no social occasions [or] dances would take place without her. So she would plow all day, and if necessary, dance all night to show that her spirit was not broken. This was a form of resistance.

. . . [Other] black women who gave birth to children and killed them, rather than have them grow up as slaves. There is a story of a woman in Kentucky. After she had grown old, one

day a visitor came by the home of her master and the mistress ordered her to take off her shoes. Hannah said, "No, I'm not going to do it," and the mistress said, "Well, You've got to do it." So she took off her shoes. They saw that four toes on one foot had been chopped off and two on the other foot were partially chopped off. This had been done by her master who had resented the attitude that she had taken to his orders. But the most tragic aspect of the story was that Hannah said that she had been the mother of thirteen children and she had strangled each of them with her own hands rather than have them grow up as slaves. Now this calls for a certain kind of deep . . . commitment to freedom and deep resentment against slavery. It is not the kind of thing we would advocate at this point, but it shows that the drive for full dignity as human beings goes very deep in the struggle.

. . . . During Reconstruction . . . women played the role that has been one of their great roles: that of support. This should not be too surprising because men were supposed to be in the lead and they exercised that right to the fullest extent. But in the period after slavery there were women emerging as leaders during certain stages of the struggle.

**The Essential Question of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century:**  
**Struggle to get in or to create a new social order**

I would like to divide my remaining comments into two parts. First, the aspect that deals with the struggle to get into the society as it obtained or the struggle for being a part of the American scene. Second, the struggle which is perhaps reaching its highest point now. That is

the struggle for a different kind of society which will reject, if necessary, the present system. The latter is the more radical struggle. . . .

### Struggling to Get In

. . . The "Talented Tenth". . . was the concept that proposed by going through . . . the various steps of education . . . black people would be accepted in the American culture. And they would be accorded their rights in proportion to the degree to which they qualified as being persons of learning and culture. We see some of the manifestations of that today. . . . [This view can lead to] a poor sense of self-worth...[It can also be seen in the] tragic manifestations of the Atlanta [Negro's] drive for education and status in terms of the expensive homes, cars, and other luxuries. . . .

[The problem with this view lies] in an assumption that those who were trained were not trained to be part of the community, but, to be, at best, "leaders" of the community. This carried with it another false assumption that being a leader meant that you were separate and apart from the masses, and, to a large extent, people were to look up to you. And that your responsibility to the people was to represent them. This means that the people were never given a sense of their own values. Their strengthened self-concepts and values of their own worth came about a little later. . . . [as] a different concept emerged: the concept of the right of the people to participate in the decisions that affected their lives So part of the struggle for being integrated was the struggle toward intellectualism. And the intellectualism so often separated us so far from the masses of people that the gulf was almost too great to be bridged. . . .

Then there was the concept . . . that we would be accepted if we qualified in terms of thrift. That was part of the Booker T. Washington concept. When we cast down our buckets where we were and become artisans and tradesmen and whatever else, then we would prove to the white world that we were qualified to become a part of it. Next there was the struggle on the legalistic basis. That was a long struggle spearheaded by the NAACP, [but] I won't take the time to deal with what I think has happened to the NAACP as a result of having placed such great confidence in the legal approach as a means of getting "in."

#### Changing the Existing Social Order and the Role of SNCC

. . . . The period that is most important to most of us now is the period when we began to question whether we really wanted "in," in the true sense of the former connotations of the word.

. . . Even though the sit-in movement started off primarily as a method of getting "in" it led to the concept of questioning whether it was worth trying to get in. Now what do I mean by that?

. . . The first effort was for being able to sit down at the lunch counters in the five and dime stores. When you look back and think of all the tragedy and suffering that the first sit-inners went through, you began to wonder, "Why pay a price like that for the privilege of eating at lunch counters. There were those who saw from the beginning that the struggle was much bigger than getting a hamburger from a lunch counter. There were those who saw from the beginning that it was part of the struggle for full dignity as a human being.

Out of that came two things, ... very significant. First, there was the concept

of the "trained" finding their identity with the masses. In 1961 about sixteen young people, all of whom had been in school, with some having finished their masters degrees, others their bachelors degrees, and some others who were just in school and decided to come out for awhile to give full time to working with the community. They dedicated themselves to working in the politically hard core areas such as Southwest Georgia, Mississippi. . . . That is how it started. This is significant because up to that time, there had been very little in the direction, of young people, or "trained" people coming out and fore-going the opportunity to get what they called a good job and good pay in order to give their time and talent to the creation of a movement within the black community on a mass basis. . . .

Another thing which came out of it at a later period was that of leadership training. As the young people moved out into the community and finally were able to be accepted by those to whom they went, they began to discover indigenous leaders. At first there was great fear among the black people in Mississippi, for example. They did not even want these young people to sleep in their homes. There are all sorts of stories that can be told about how people had to sleep in broken-down automobiles for a while until the community accepted them.

The black struggle has always been highlighted by "leaders." There were periods when we had two or three leaders who spoke for us. But this was the period when we were trying to develop people who would speak for themselves. Whether they always succeeded in doing this is another question. This was part of the value system of that first group of young people who came out of school to work in the community.

The third thing that came out of this movement was the recognition of the responsibility of the federal government toward the problems of black people. In accordance with this, they began to push for this responsibility in several ways. One was in the area of voter registration. The voter registration was not just for the sake of getting people to register but to get them politicized to the extent that they would recognize that they could only fight the system if they had some political power. It also helped to show the limitations of political power simply by the vote. Most of you are familiar with when the sit-ins escalated into the freedom rides and when they escalated into mass confrontations in Albany, Georgia and other places.

It is important to understand that going into Mississippi was not accidental. The young people who were a part of that earlier group had made contact with the officialdom of the NAACP and other organizations and had found that they had a very negative attitude toward anyone going into Mississippi to work. They, [the NAACP and other civil rights organizations], had felt that there was nothing to be expected from it. The decision to go was largely spearheaded by a young woman named Diane Nash. . . . [who] coined the phrase, "Move on Mississippi." Although her concept was to just go in to start classes in nonviolent resistance, it caught on quickly and others moved in with her with ideas that were beyond the scope of nonviolent resistance classes. . . .

The first effort to organize a voter registration class in McComb, Mississippi precipitated such violent reaction . . . as to produce the first -federal case on the question of voter registration in that period. . . . This was a learning process because they began to see that getting in through that effort, voter registration and even confrontation with the federal government, was not

working. One of the lessons that was learned was that the limitations of the federal government was very obvious in terms of its confrontation with the southern power structure. In learning that lesson, they began to also learn that one of the major reasons *for the absence of confrontation* {crossed out on my copy} was that they were all tied up politically with each other. For example, with many of the major committees in the Senate and the House being headed by Southerners there was reluctance to move. This brought us to a decision that eventually led into the mass demonstrations that were characterized by protests such as the Selma March.

Now what does all this say? It says that we went through these steps as part of a learning process. I hope what we learned was to understand that any group of people can consider themselves free if they accept the premises of the society of which they are a part. That does not mean that they are free, but they can consider themselves free. Unfortunately a large number of black people have considered themselves free because they were able to accept things that were said about the American system. They believed that it was a democracy and that there were equal rights, that every man could be recognized on his merits. But the sit-in movement and the subsequent developments which grew out of it began to punch holes, very deep holes into that concept. More people began to see that what passed as the perfect image of the American democracy was not that perfect, especially for black people.

#### Where do Women Fit in the Movement?

It also began to raise the question of just where did the woman fit into the movement. I have dealt very little with the woman question. But I raised it in the context of how could black



men who were part of a struggle for freedom evaluate the participation of their women in that struggle. Unfortunately for a long time the women in the struggle, although they took certain initiatives in discussion were not as integrally a part of that struggle as was assumed. For a short while there was no question of the man versus the woman but then we came to a point where the male began to act out a superiority role. If you went into a civil rights project, it was dominated by the male. The women had charge of the Freedom Houses in terms of cleaning them up and cooking whatever food they could get. At best they would be secretaries in the offices. The men didn't even pick up their own cigarette ashes.

Around 1965 there began to develop a great deal of questioning about what is the role of women in the struggle. Out of it, unfortunately, came a concept that at that stage of the game, black women had to bolster the ego of the male. And bolstering the ego of the male meant in the black man's connotation or in his concept that it was a kind of compensatory act. It implied that the black male had been treated in such a manner as to have been emasculated both by the white society and, he began to say, to some extent, his black women because of the whole question of the female being the head of the household in many instances. I think it was here that we began to deal with the question of the need of black women to play the subordinate role. I personally have never bought this as being valid because I think it raises the question as to whether the black man is going to try to be a man on the basis of his capacity to deal with issues and situations rather than be a man because he has some people around him who claim him to be a man by taking subordinate roles.

Now this may bring us to the question of what is the role of the black woman in the freedom movement. I don't think you could go through the freedom movement without finding that the backbone of the support of the movement, to a large extent, were women. When demonstrations took place and when the community acted, usually it was some woman who came to the fore first. It was not too much of an accident that the Montgomery Bus Boycott was sparked by the action of this little woman, Mrs. Rosa Parks.

Mrs. Parks did not just begin to think that way when she refused to move to the back of the bus, on that particular day. I happened to have known her during the years she worked with the NAACP when she and another man in the area were about the only two people that took issue with any of the oppressive measures that were taking place in Montgomery. Out of this background, Rosa Parks reached a point of decision and because it was Rosa Parks, the community responded. Out of the response came something else, [a] boycott. This is just an example of the fact that she had been a part of the struggle and that women in some instances have been key to it.

...However, at this stage the big crucial question is, what is the American society? Is it the kind of society that [allows] . . . black women or black men or anyone . . . [to seek] a dignified existence as a human being, that permits people to grow and develop according to their capacity, that gives them a sense of value not only for themselves but a sense of value for other human beings. Is this the kind of society that is going to permit that? I think there is a great question as to whether it can become that kind of society. For example, the whole budget of the United States has been balanced in the direction of more money for defense and cutting down on anti-

poverty money and money for the rehabilitation of the cities. The justification is that naturally we have to have defense, and we don't want to rock the boat, [or change] the financial structure of the system, because there might be a recession. Therefore, the poor people and the bad conditions of the city will have to wait.

Now is that kind of system which you can expect to get in and find real value? A system that provides for the human values that we have struggled for so long in terms of the freedom struggle. This is the question that we have to ask ourselves. If it isn't the system, what is the system we want? How do we bring about that system, and in bringing about that system, is it possible for us to be caught up in such bags as the man must be the leader and the man must be the spokesman and the man must do the talking and this woman must be there as a supporter.

Have we the capacity to jump over some of the stages that have confronted other men-women combinations? This is not just new to black people. It is probably a world scene. Have we the capacity to not get caught in that bag and to face the fact that if there is to be any real freedom, we are going to have to devise new ways of dealing with our internal problems as far as man-woman relationships are concerned. We are going to have to equip ourselves to deal with the man on the outside in realistic ways.

I am not going to try to deal with the question of so-called violence, the kind, for example, that took place at Cornell recently, because it raises the same kind of question for me. Did the fellows who had found it necessary to have the guns have them because they did not feel adequate to argue their point or to have enough unity to stay together without the gun. Why the gun?

... [There is] something else that also bothers me. That is the concept that you can mount a basic social change by telling every move you are trying to make on the radio or on the television. My position is you cannot use the man's tools to organize your own social change. You've got to find ways of organizing people so that you can communicate with them without having to resort to the bravado of parading on television and radio to show your great physical prowess or strength.

... In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning – getting down to and understanding the root cause. It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system. That is easier said than done. But one of the things that has to be faced is in the process of wanting to change that system, how much have we got to do to find out who we are, where we have come from and where we are going.

About twenty-eight years ago, I used to go around making speeches, and I would open up my talk by saying that there was a man who had a health problem and he was finally told by the doctor that they could save his sight or save his memory, but they couldn't save both. They asked which did he want and he said save my sight because I would rather see where I am going than remember where I have been. [But] I am saying as you must say too that in order to see where we are going, we must understand where we have been. This calls for a great deal of

analytical thinking and evaluation of methods that have been used. We have to begin to think in terms of where do we really want to go and how can we get there.

Finally, . . . it is not a job that is going to be done by all the people simultaneously. Some will have to be done in cadres, the advanced cadres and some will have to come later. But one of the guiding principles has to be that we cannot lead a struggle that involves masses of people without identifying with the people and without getting the people to understand what their potentials are, what their strengths are. We must let them see that we either sink or swim together. This goes for black men and black women sinking or swimming together as over against sinking or swimming separately.