

andrew j. young

and birmingham

We often talk about non-violence like four proverbial blind men attempting to describe an elephant. We all talk about that part that we've been most involved with, and very few of us really struggle to get a full sense of the whole non-violent movement and what it meant. I would say that if we are really going to understand what nonviolence was about in one part in the sixties, it might serve us best to focus on Birmingham to see just what went on there; how it happened; why it happened, and maybe out of that set of experiences, we might realize a prototype for the creation of future movements. It just happens that all of the dynamics necessary worked and came together in Birmingham. If we're talking about institutionalizing the kind of nonviolence that came out of Martin Luther King's life and work, it might be good for us to look at Birmingham. I continue to see the significance of things that we did unconsciously, and I now understand how important that was.

Therefore, I've tried to define the key elements in the Birmingham movement. Such an outline might allow us to see how we might develop program to do very consciously, and in an organized way, things that seem to just sort of happen.

The first thing that I recognize is that there was an existent cultural foundation. I don't think Birmingham could have happened had it not been for Fred Shuttlesworth and the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights who had been there struggling for almost seven years. And if one takes a look at the kind of meetings that the Alabama Christian Movement were having, you realize that they really were old-fashioned prayer meetings. It was a group of dedicated folk -- church folk -- that would come every Monday night and had been coming for seven years. The old folk would come in and start praying in the old-fashioned-moaning- down-on-their-knees prayerful way. Later, young people would come in and start singing freedom songs. This soulful revival was certainly the base of this community of protest.

I think this was also true of Ghandi's movement. He was able to go into a community and build a movement because there was a common cultural ground

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that he shared with the people. He developed movement out of that culture. I think we've also got to go back and realize that this is the culture that hundreds of years ago produced the song, "Ain't Gonna Study War No More." It fascinates me to think that slaves wrote a song like that and that there has always been somewhere in the black tradition a peace tradition.

There was also a common biblical language. Martin Luther King was the product of four generations of Baptist preachers. The culture of the Black community was preserved by the Baptist Church essentially. And because of this you could go in and start a sermon and everybody knew the meaning behind "dry bones", "wandering around the Wilderness" and "moving into the Promised Land." These sermons had been preached in a traditional Baptist context for hundreds of years. So, what Martin was really doing was giving expression to a social movement in the cultural context of the people.

I rack my brain trying to think of Martin quoting Ghandi or talking about philosophical nonviolence in that setting and to my recollection, he seldom did. That was something he talked about when he was in New York or for a NEW YORK TIMES interview. When he was talking to his black constituents, he talked almost strictly in their biblical cultural context.

Tactically things came together in Birmingham, also. Martin started in Montgomery and developed a basically church movement. The student movement, primarily in Nashville, began to develop tactics of community organization that were different from the tactics of community organization that had emerged in Montgomery. The student movement and the preacher movement came together tactically. We actually met and merged in Albany a year before and learned by our mistakes, so when we got to Birmingham, basically we had affected that merger between students and preachers, between community organizers and charismatic leaders. There was a tactical merger there that I see as rooted in our cultural foundation.

The next thing that I can remember is planning strategy. The first strategy meeting was held at Dorchester Center late in 1962. Board Members and people from around the country who were informally related, came together for think sessions. It was at that meeting that Fred Shuttlesworth said to Martin, "We've got to move in Birmingham. We've been hammering away for seven years with no impact. If segregation is going to fall, we've got to at least crack the wall in Birmingham." It was out of that two-or-three day think session that we began to develop and do the planning and strategy for the emergence of a Birmingham movement.

Out of this planning and strategy meeting in Dorchester emerged a position paper which we called the Birmingham Manifesto. It was really a product of the local leadership from Birmingham, that after discussing the situation thoroughly, analyzed specifically what was wrong, and decided on four or five issues that they would begin to organize people around. This position paper was very important in being able to pull together the leadership, both locally and nationally. It was a kind of leadership unification -- the building of a coalition. This expressed itself in many ways.

First of all, it was necessary to go to Birmingham and get together everybody that thought he was a leader. Anyone who thought of himself as a leader had to be contacted. The important thing was not just involving people

positively, but neutralizing people so that you didn't have anyone working actively against you. So the local unification of leadership was done around the principles that had been developed in the paper. Even then we had conflicts between--now we would define it between blacks and Negroes and early coloreds. Birmingham had its militants, it had its middle-class comfortable constituents, and it had its people that we called "Uncle Toms"--people who were still living on a survival ethic and were only willing to protect themselves. The Negro middle-class had adopted almost an education ethic that if you were educated you could protect yourself and you could make it in the white man's world by imitating and assimilating his education and his culture.

The militants were people like Shuttlesworth who saw that the problem was not an individual one; but a systematic problem. It was very hard to get those three groups in Birmingham together. I don't think anyone but a person of Martin's international leadership stature could have done it, and even then he didn't quite make it.

We often talk about the "hand of God" in the leadership. There were four young men in Birmingham in churches, that had come there within a year, that happened to be pastors of the largest churches in the city. John Cross at 16th Street Baptist Church, A. D. King had just gone to First Baptist in Ensley which was a very influential church, Nelson Smith at New Pilgrim, and John Porter, who had been Martin's assistant in Montgomery at Dexter, was at Sixth Avenue Baptist. The members of those four Baptist Churches gave the movement a constituency of close to 5,000 people--to start with. When you add that constituency to the 500 or 600 that Fred Shuttlesworth had organized, we had the basis of a movement. We pulled together the middle-classes and organized an advisory committee and they began to meet and discuss the outlined issues and demands. We had men like Arthur Shores, John Drew, the President of the NAACP, Dr. Nixon and A. G. Gaston. The advisory committee was not nearly so important in the demonstration phase, but it was extremely important when we got ready to put the community back together. By and large, the leadership fell right back into the hands of the middle-class, and had they not been involved at all through the process, they wouldn't have been prepared to bring leadership in the period of reconciliation that followed. So, it was very important to have them involved in the thinking and planning, and it created a very interesting tension. This committee also attempted to serve the role of a strategy committee, but by this time strategy had moved from the committee level to the streets, and the strategy was really being determined to some extent by the people who were most actively involved. There was always tension between the Advisory Committee and the action, but it was a wholesome tension, and one that was needed.

A New York Committee was set up which immediately proceeded to do two very important things: It began to spread the philosophy and the message of the position paper outside of Atlanta in places like Washington and New York. There were people who were prepared to understand this movement before it took place who would inevitably be called upon by the press when things began to happen, and they were already briefed and oriented and could function as a part of a national network without day-to-day contact because they had been briefed in advance. Secondly, this committee raised about \$100,000 bond

money, without which we probably could not have put the movement together.

Then we began a period of negotiations. On the basis of the position paper, we began to have meetings with the downtown power structure--the white community. Basically, what we were doing was educating our opposition. In Gandhian terms it was beginning to come together from our different perspectives to seek a new truth--this situation in Birmingham was intolerable.

In truth, though, the white community didn't understand. I read a book by Ivan Allen, the former Mayor of Atlanta. He talks very honestly about the fact that no one in the white community ever thought it was a major issue for a black person to go to the bathroom in a department store.

Of course, we got the same answers time and time again--there was nothing that could be done. This was ridiculous! We were troublemakers, agitators, so forth and so on. But that started the process of communication before the hostilities and tensions built up. And when, of course, they refused to give in to any of the demands of the position paper, then that called for demonstrations.

The gentleman who led the first demonstration was a fellow 78 years old. He led a march of two or three hundred young people. Basically, his position was that he had lived his life, and that he was ready to give his life in order that young people might have a better life.

We knew we had about 500 people who were committed to go to jail and every night at mass meetings we had an altar call and people would stand up and come to the altar and sign their names and be committed to join the demonstrations. But 500 wouldn't really last very long. We had first of all put together in some ways the classes and the masses, and now we were bridging the generation gap and putting together young and old. This group of mature religious adults that were in Fred Shuttlesworth's group were now about to be supplemented by the younger generation.

In the course of demonstration, we had training and action. Every night there was a mass meeting where the pledging took place. People would then come to workshops in the afternoon and all day long at the churches where they would be given training, and then demonstrations were scheduled on a day-to-day basis. Our notion in the beginning was that it was going to be a long haul. We figured that if we could have about 25 people a day demonstrating, and that with 25 arrests a day, we could sustain demonstrations. We usually selected 25 people, asked them to spend five days in jail and bonded them out after five days.

The demonstrations were an attempt to dramatize the whole problem of what it meant to be black and segregated in Birmingham.

An important part of the demonstration was mass meetings. A mass meeting was important for two reasons: It gave a sense of direction to the community, and it bound the community together spiritually.

We were very conscious of the fact that mass media in America was communicating with people all over the world. I remember when we went to a Baptist Church and were rejected there, somebody sent us the picture of rejection from the Paris newspapers. We were very conscious that what we were doing had a national and world significance.

We also understood that prime time on Huntley-Brinkley was at that time worth about \$30,000 a minute, and so we figured that if we were getting three

minutes a day on each network's news show, then we were getting a million dollars a day of "educational TV."

We set up a network which was basically a press headquarters where everyday we held press briefings, told the people in the press corps what we were going to do, why we were going to do it, and answered all of their arguments in advance before it took place. We informed the police of everything that we were going to do at this point. We operated strictly in the open. So, in essence, we were consciously using the mass media to try to get across to the nation what our message was.

Up to this point, we were mobilizing our power. We really began to use the muscle in nonviolence when we began the economic withdrawal. Marching was a means of bringing the issues to the surface and dramatizing the situation. But the real power was that 250,000 black citizens were not buying anything but food and medicine. Out of a population of about 600,000, you can understand how that would cripple the economy, and it didn't take long for that to happen. Black citizens didn't buy anything but food and medicine. Three times a day we would check downtown, and anytime we saw more than five black people in a store, we got concerned that the boycott was slipping. It was really tight, but to get it that tight and to effect an economic withdrawal, there was a constant going back to the leadership. The preachers who were afraid of demonstrations and who didn't want to be a part of the demonstrations in the beginning would at least announce the boycott in their churches. We produced about 50,000 handbills every week and over the weekend, through the churches and door-to-door leafleting, we kept the community informed and encouraged the boycott.

Economic withdrawal was a lesson we picked up from Nashville. The Nashville boycott was a response to the student arrests, and the cancelling of charge accounts by the middle-class was really the economic power factor that went along with nonviolence.

It was just before Easter. So, our message was "no Easter shopping." The preachers on Palm Sunday all preached in blue jeans and dungarees. I think that's when the dungarees became nationally significant in the movement.

The economic withdrawal locally answers the questions, "Will nonviolence work?" "Well, what do you mean?" "Well nonviolence is always predicated on the threat of violence. It was only the threat of violence in demonstrations that made the demonstrations effective." That's just not true. Anytime you can stop 250,000 folk from shopping, it's effective. And with no threat of violence. You can be very polite when you lock up the economy, which literally was accomplished.

The stores downtown were asked to desegregate their lunch counter facilities, to remove segregation signs and to hire blacks. The economic withdrawal campaign began to have national implications -- no town exists on its own. When we began to hurt Woolworths in Birmingham, there were sympathy boycotts on Woolworths in New York and in Philadelphia. A by-product of mass media. We generated a national spirit. We ignited supportive actions.

It is easier to organize black folks when there is something exciting and action oriented. It is possible through economic and political action to mobilize and organize to bring about change. One of the problems in Birmingham was

that no black folk were registered to vote. Of the 250,000 blacks in Birmingham, only 6,000 were registered to vote.

In Nashville and Atlanta, you had black voters that had maintained a moderate to liberal power structure politically. In Birmingham, you had the most archaic old-South structure because blacks were not registered.

Before the settlement was reached, when the youth would get out of jail, staff had them moving right on into voter registration; starting to register people even before the demonstrations were over -- realizing that political action and demonstrations were not two different things, but part and parcel of the same, as was the economic action.

So the local voter registration and political mobilization was very important right on the heels of all this excitement. On the heels of such excitement, voter registration and political education were the most logical steps.

The presence of the Justice Department of the Kennedy Administration had a definite effect upon the outcome. We would usually go to the negotiation sessions and tell them what the plans were going to be for the next couple of weeks and say, "You know we could call this off, if you just changed," and the same old story, and we kept meeting.

Martin and Ralph and about 1,000 others were in jail during this period. The ideological statements, or moral statement or appeal, had a national effect. As soon as the "Letter From A Birmingham Jail" was issued, the Friends Service Committee printed and distributed 50,000 copies. This appeal had a circulation of close to a million before Martin got out of jail. It was reprinted everywhere, and it pulled supporters together, whereas, the position paper was basically the demands of the people.

The jailer would not allow Martin paper to write on, so the entire letter was written in the margins of newspapers. Martin was allowed newspapers, and he would write around the margins of the newspapers and on toilet tissue and backs of envelopes, and the letter was pieced together on the outside. It was the kind of document that spoke so much to the conditions of Birmingham that it was nationally distributed. It was mimeographed and printed everywhere. We had no control over that. It was an important feature in making the whole movement work.

Bull Connor made the impact greater, but the dynamics would have taken effect without Bull Connor and the dogs.

We have been looking at nonviolence philosophically and morally and I think that it is important also to see it tactically.

Finally, when the demonstrations were so massive and the economic withdrawal program was so tight, literally, the town was paralyzed.

Then the Justice Department was able to pull together a committee of 100 businessmen that met with us and we began to pull together the white community to bring about change. We helped them fashion a program as to how the desegregation would take place.

The other dynamic involved was judicial action. From the very beginning the Legal Defense Fund of the NAACP was present with a team of lawyers. There was a legal strategy which was going on concurrently. But in those days, as now, the lawyers were on the conservative side. We would tell the police all that

we were going to do and almost anyone else, but we tried to keep it from the lawyers as long as possible because they would say, "how are we going to defend you on this?" We didn't want to be defended. The fact that there was a team there that was making use of the judicial process that we could use when needed, was tactically necessary. We had spent \$100,000 and there were about 3,000 people in jail. We just didn't have the money to get them out. It looked like the movement was dead. We really had run out of troops at that point, and Martin and Ralph and a group of us were meeting in the Gaston Motel. One group was saying, "Martin, these people are your responsibility." "You need to go out and raise money to get them out of jail." Another group argued to go to jail with them. Martin's decision to go into jail, at that point, was really a kind of leap of faith. That happened to be Good Friday, and we saw that in all kinds of Christian significance. By that Easter Sunday, it seemed as though the movement took on a completely new life, and that's when the kids took it over.

The people were going down to the jail to pray and sing for Martin and Ralph in jail on Easter Sunday. We got about a block or two from the jail, and Bull Connor had the whole street blocked. He had fire engines across the street blocking it and firemen with their hoses, the police with their dogs. We walked up to the line. He said, "halt." Someone told everyone to get down on their knees. You do that for two reasons: one, people get excited when they are standing, but when you are down on your knees you have an excuse to close your eyes and pray. It's really the best way to control a crowd.

So when folk got down on their knees, the old folks started praying and one of these low moans went through. I mean they were really moaning in strong old-fashion. Finally, Rev. Billups jumped up and said, "The Lord is with this movement and we're going on to the jail." And everybody got up and started walking. We walked right on through. Bull Connor was standing there screaming: "Stop them, stop them!" The men with the fire hoses had evidently been caught up in all this, and they just dropped them, and the dogs were just as quiet. Walking through the red fire trucks, folks started preaching about the Lord parting the Red Sea again.

Today, there isn't anyone doing much negotiation for the oppressed. The mood has gone to where it's attack and demand and one of complete polarization. I think the amazing thing about the Birmingham movement was that in spite of all that was going on, we could walk downtown to City Hall alone without police escort. Through the entire movement there was not a polarization of blacks and whites, who were actively opposing each other.

Birmingham presented to the nonviolent movement a philosophical, moral and tactical dynamic that is yet unchallenged in its ability to captivate the necessary creative tension for progressive social change.