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### *Fundi*- The Enduring Leadership Legacy of Civil Rights Activist Ella Baker

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Many Black activists have pronounced Ella Baker the *Fundi* of the American Civil Rights Movement. Moses and Cobb (2001), veterans of the Mississippi voter registration project from the early 1960s, named her “our *Fundi* in the tradition of community organizing” (p. 4). Joanne Grant (1981), who later wrote an important biography of Ella Baker’s life, called her film about Baker’s legacy – *Fundi: The story of Ella Baker*. *Fundi* is a Swahili word for the person who possesses practical wisdom and is skilled at passing on to new generations the knowledge that the community’s elders regard as most important. The *Fundi* is a teacher and a learner. The *Fundi* supports other people in learning the lessons of the elders. The *Fundi* does not seek credit or fame. She is quietly satisfied to provide a bridge from one generation to the next and to help young people root their ideas and actions in their culture’s most enduring traditions. Throughout her life Ella Baker stepped in again and again to model learning, relationship-building, teaching, and leadership.

Although she devoted her life to upholding the cause of racial justice and gained a reputation among civil rights activists for being a great leader, the name of Ella Jo Baker remains largely unknown to the general public. Born in 1903 in Norfolk, Virginia, Baker was the granddaughter of proud and defiant ex-slaves. With the support of her parents who made many sacrifices to further their daughter’s education, Baker graduated from North Carolina’s Shaw University as the valedictorian of her 1927 class. Almost immediately after graduation, she left the South for New York City and immersed herself in the excitement of the Harlem Renaissance. It wasn’t long before she was participating actively in a variety of organizations to help people secure their rights and enhance their economic opportunities. All of this led eventually to her assuming a leadership position in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) – the preeminent Black advocacy group in the United States since its founding in 1909. As Director of Branches for the NAACP, Baker was especially effective in maintaining contact with the Association’s grassroots membership and pushed hard for education and training programs to prepare rank and file people from throughout the South for leadership roles. In the 1950s, Baker was the first Executive Director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) – the organization that grew out of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and supported Dr. Martin Luther King’s efforts to combat racism. In 1960, she left the SCLC to launch the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) – the group set up to sustain the student protest movement that began so dramatically on February 1, 1960, when four Black students from the Agricultural and Technical College of North Carolina staged a sit-in at a segregated Woolworth’s lunch counter in downtown Greensboro to protest racial discrimination.

Throughout all of this work, Baker stressed the value of learning, growth, and the development of grassroots leadership. She saw herself primarily as an adult educator and a cultivator of untapped leadership. Every cause, in her view, simmered with opportunities for education. Taking the time to think through the issues, to cast off worn out assumptions, and to plan reflectively for the long term mattered most to her. She maintained that social action yielded valuable learning when sufficient time was set aside for reflection and dialogue.

She held steadfastly to her belief that leaders are at their best when supporting ordinary people to lead themselves. She believed in leadership, but she particularly believed that the most effective leaders are self-effacing people, more interested in developing leadership in others than in getting recognition for their individual achievements. When asked by an interviewer to explain how you organize people, she said matter of factly that you don’t start with what *you* think. You start with what *they* think. She continued, “You start where the people are. Identification with people...If you talk

down to people, they can sense it. They can feel it. And they know whether you are talking *with* them, or talking *at* them, or talking *about* them” (Cantarow & O’Malley, p. 70, 72). She affirmed repeatedly that leaders are teachers and must create opportunities for people to learn from each other and to reflect on the best ways to take action collectively. She maintained that leading and learning are part of the same process and that no successful movement can be continued without leaders who are intent on learning from those around them. Leaders were critical to Ella Baker, not as solitary individuals who bask in the reflected glory of group action, but as solid and selfless collaborators in the enduring struggle for social justice. When she was first organizing the group that became SNCC, Baker hesitated to be overly directive. She observed, “those who had worked closely with me knew that I believed very firmly in the right of the people who were under the heel to be the ones to decide what action they were going to take to get from under their oppression” (Cantarow & O’Malley, p. 84). She did not seek credit or even much compensation for what she did, but she received enormous gratification from witnessing people, who enjoyed little notice from others, grow into leaders owing to her support. As Barbara Ransby (2003) shows in her magisterial new biography, Ella Baker’s approach to leadership was “democratic and reciprocal.” She saw leaders as teachers and as learners in which learning is “based on a fluid and interactive relationship between student and teacher,” (p. 359) and leading is seen as an ever-shifting bond that holds leaders and followers together.

The kind of leader Baker strived to be can be inferred from her comments on working with the NAACP branches. She observed:

If you feel you are part of them and they are part of you, you don’t say “I’m-a-part-of-you.” What you really do is you point out something. Especially the lower-class people, the people who’d felt the heel of oppression, see they *knew* what you were talking about when you spoke about police brutality. They *knew* what you were speaking about when you talked about working at a job, doing the same work, and getting a differential in pay. And if your sense of being a part of them got over to them, they appreciated that. Somebody would get the point. Somebody would come out and say, “I’m gon’ join that darn organization.” (Cantarow & O’Malley, p. 72)

#### Baker as Servant and Transformer

Baker’s goal of identifying with the people, of learning about their goals and desires and building from there, recalls Greenleaf’s (1977) notion of servant leadership, Burns’s (1978) theory of transforming leadership, and Freire’s (1973) dialogic approach to education and transformation. While working for the NAACP, Baker strived to be a servant-first. If her leadership did not help those served to grow as persons, then it lacked any real value. In line with Greenleaf’s claim that servant leaders are superb listeners, Baker practiced the discipline of listening assiduously and seemed to concur with Greenleaf that listening could powerfully build “strength in other people” (p. 17). But she also followed Burns in that she put the utmost effort into practicing leadership as a reciprocal process, into realizing goals that were “mutually held by both leaders and followers” (p. 425). She also invested great effort in the teaching function of leadership and the role she might play in transforming a seemingly ordinary action into something momentous that brought “end-values, such as liberty, justice, and equality” (p. 426) to the forefront. In these ways, she also followed Freire closely as Ransby (2003) has so brilliantly demonstrated. According to Ransby (2003), the SNCC-inspired Freedom Schools, that led to huge increases in the registration of Black voters in the early 1960s, carried the imprint of Baker’s philosophy and practice of leadership. First, like Freire, Baker contended that to lead is to teach, not to “transfer knowledge but to create the possibility for the production or construction of knowledge” among learners and followers (p.328). Second, for Baker, teaching and learning were mutual, part of the same continuum, in which willingness “to listen across boundaries of difference” counts most of all (p. 328). Third, teaching, like leading, is not a top-down, didactic process. It is above all, an occasion to help learners [and followers] “begin to question” (p. 329).

Ella Baker respected people in the classic sense. She strove to acknowledge and appreciate them in all their complexity and fullness. She did not make assumptions about the people she endeavored to lead, but actively sought to find out all she could about them. She then used what she learned to facilitate opportunities for learning and taking action that reflected their beliefs. Baker grew famous among the rank and file membership of the NAACP as the leader who seemed to know and understand each branch’s special situation and the unique challenges that each branch leader faced.

Transformational leaders do not so much orate and lecture, as they create opportunities for people to learn together, to become, as Burns (1978) points out, “joint seekers of truth and of mutual actualization” (p. 449). Baker noted that her work as activist and leader did not stress imparting new theories or drawing complex pictures of social relations. She focused her efforts instead on helping people to more clearly “see their own ideas” (Ransby, p. 363). She did this, as Bob Moses (2001) has pointed out by quietly working “in out-of-the-way places” and then by really “digging into [life in] local communities” (p. 4). She did this as well the many times she delivered speeches that helped people to see the universality of the Civil Rights struggle.

Baker was unusually wide-awake to the people and the events swirling around her. Listening closely, observing keenly, speaking concisely, seeing discerningly, she picked up on things other people missed. She was famous among the SNCC membership for holding individual side conversations with quieter participants (often women) while group deliberations were going on, and then interrupting the discussion to announce to those assembled that someone she had just spoken to held a powerful idea that needed to be heard. Dallard (1990) reports that Baker would sit down next to a particularly reticent participant, quietly draw that person out, and then grab the attention of the rest of the group by shouting: "Look, here's somebody with something to say about that" (p. 84). She was also the one inclined to locate areas of agreement or consensus in the midst of what appeared to be sharp conflict. During a meeting of SNCC when a bitter argument broke out between the partisans of direct action and civil disobedience and those committed to advancing the goal of increasing voter registration, Baker stepped in with unusual directness to show how both goals could be pursued simultaneously. Reflecting on this occasion, Baker noted: "I never intervened...if I could avoid it. Most of the youngsters had been trained...to follow adults....I felt they ought to have a chance to learn to think things through and to make the decisions. But this was a point at which I did have something to say" (Dallard, p. 86).

### Baker as Bridge-Builder

In 1958, Baker reluctantly accepted the title of "Temporary Executive Director" of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference - the civil rights organization that Martin Luther King created to capitalize on the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. When she stepped down from this position almost 3 years later, her title still included the word "temporary." When her male successor took over, he was immediately granted the full title of "Executive Director." As a strong-willed, intellectual female in an organization largely staffed by males, Baker rarely got the recognition that her male colleagues enjoyed. Yet few of her male counterparts knew grassroots leaders as well as she. Few were as comfortable as Baker relating to the SCLC's broad range of constituents. She was equally effective with highly educated organizers or poor, illiterate farmers.

Baker can be viewed as a classic "bridge leader" - a term coined by Belinda Robnett (1997) in her study of African American female activists. She often did the important behind-the-scenes work that helped to build a movement or organization, while others, usually male, got the credit. Baker's supporters and close associates, though, understood how transforming her leadership was. They recognized how dedicated she was and how authentically she believed in people's potential. Like few other leaders in the Civil Rights Movement she built trust and commitment from the ground up, making possible many of the dramatic accomplishments we associate with more famous activists.

### Empowering SNCC and Group-Centered Leadership

In April of 1960, with her tenure at SCLC coming to an end, Baker welcomed over 200 student protesters from 19 states to Raleigh, North Carolina to propose an organization to coordinate and support the emerging student protest movement. Inspired by the four Black students from Greensboro who stunned the nation by "sitting-in" at a segregated lunch counter, hundreds of young protesters from throughout the South followed the lead of the Greensboro students. Many of these students were hauled off to jail for disturbing the public peace and for defying laws promoting segregation. Their patience and forbearance in the face of white resistance and hate was inspiring. Baker admired the students' initiative and identified closely with their courageous struggle. She quietly created an atmosphere at the conference that would allow the students to share their experiences freely, to learn from each other, and to build a foundation for a new student movement. Baker knew that the students' actions were momentous, but feared that anxious adult leaders, like King, might slow their progress by urging caution. In organizing the Raleigh meeting, Baker hoped to provide a forum for discussion and learning that would remain student-centered and would allow the students to explore the creation of their own, independent organization.

In fact it is instructive, at this point, to take note of the contrasting leadership styles of Baker and Martin Luther King. There is no question, of course, about King's greatness as a leader, but there is reason to believe that his strong, charismatic, almost mythic style of leadership sometimes did as much harm to the progress of the Civil Rights Movement as it did good (Payne, pp. 400-402; Ransby, p. 188). For one thing, the hero worship that King inspired sometimes had the effect of disempowering people. It made them think that they could not achieve great goals on their own, that without his talent for striking oratory and his capacity for trenchant analysis, no real gains would be made. The founder of the Highlander Folk School, Myles Horton (1990), has noted that King's leadership was so strong and charismatic that it often inhibited others. He once told King: "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" (p. 127). Horton urged King to cultivate new leaders, but he never seemed able to do this, as the SCLC depended so heavily on burnishing King's powerful image. Furthermore, the tendency of the media to focus all of their attention on King - a practice encouraged by SCLC administrators - meant that many deserving activists got little or no credit for their efforts. Bob Moses recalled conversing with Ella Baker's successor at SCLC, Wyatt T Walker, about the need for many leaders in the movement. Moses believed it was a huge mistake not to encourage multiple leaders. Walker, who was representative of the all-male leadership allied with King,

ended the exchange abruptly by declaring, "We all need to get behind one leader" (p. 28).

E.D. Nixon, who effectively and courageously provided the impetus for the Montgomery Bus Boycott, was one grassroots leader who was completely overshadowed by King. Nixon's resentment over this slight persisted for many years (Branch, p. 190). Baker, on the other hand, wanted ordinary people to be supported for achieving their own goals and to receive appropriate credit for their accomplishments. They didn't need a savior to put an end to oppression. All they needed, Baker averred, "was themselves, one another, and the will to persevere" (Ransby, p. 188). A whole different view of leadership was needed according to Ella Baker, one that didn't depend on a charismatic guru. Baker's view was that the group, if sufficiently cohesive and collaborative, could more efficiently and effectively assume the leadership role. Baker observed: "Instead of the leader as a person who was supposed to be a magic man, you could develop individuals who were bound together by a concept that benefited the larger number of individuals and provided an opportunity for them to grow into being responsible for carrying out a program" (Ransby, p. 188).

When Baker spoke at the conclusion of the student gathering in Raleigh, she touched on a number of these themes. First, she made it clear that the sit-ins symbolized something much more than the right of black people to be served at a segregated lunch counter. The daring actions of these courageous black college students were not just part of a struggle for their own emancipation or that of their race. They were part of a movement to uphold human freedom that held "moral implications...for the whole world" (Forman, p. 218). What they accomplished and how they responded under pressure could inspire freedom lovers across the globe to rise up against their oppressors. Second, because the struggle was so universal and so urgent, she noted, a democratic, group-centered focus must be maintained. By de-emphasizing the leadership of charismatic individuals, the goal of expanding the sphere of human liberty could be guided by many voices and not detoured by power grabs. For Baker, true leadership occurs when the individual is stretched to his or her highest potential "for the benefit of the group" (Forman, p. 218). She linked this point to a third observation that the students would remain adamantly independent of adult control and of traditional top-down ways of running organizations. Spurred on by Baker, they wanted the group as a whole to provide the necessary leadership to advance their cause. Finally, Baker concluded that although the conference in Raleigh had been a great triumph, the future success of the student movement depended on the willingness of its leaders to embrace adult education. She called for training in non-violence, group dynamics, and ways to creatively redirect the rage engendered by racism toward meaningful and lasting social change.

At the October, 1960 gathering of SNCC, a follow-up to their April meeting, the student leaders exhibited a new found confidence in their ability to shape the organization's future course. With the recognition and support of numerous other activist groups, SNCC now emerged as a less vulnerable and more permanent human rights group. What must have greatly pleased Ella Baker was SNCC's ongoing commitment to group-centered leadership. Resisting the temptation to create a hierarchical structure and eager to support rather than to control local organizations, the members of SNCC continued to believe that they could do their best work by nurturing local leadership and by keeping lines of communication open for the benefit of all. Over time tensions would emerge over the true mission of SNCC, but there was never any doubt throughout most of its history that one of its most important functions was to help local community groups "determine their own direction" (Carson, p. 30). As Payne (1995) has noted, the key to SNCC's influence and legacy was "the respect it had for people regardless of their status and the ways in which that respect empowered those people to make the contributions they had in them" (p. 185). Few dissented from the belief that without Ella Baker's leadership and vision it would have been impossible to sustain this enduring purpose.

Although Baker was self-effacing and often quiet, the vision she projected was radical. She reminded the students frequently that they needed to "learn to think in radical terms." Baker used "the term *radical* in its original meaning - getting down to and understanding the root cause. "It means," she asserted, "facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system" (Moses & Robb, p. 3). Baker was respected as a leader who believed in the Civil Rights Movement, but who, in a larger sense, used the Movement as an opportunity to radically alter an unjust system.

### Leader as Teacher/Leader as Learner

Even as SNCC began to exert a major influence on the Civil Rights Movement, the need for searching and extensive discussions about its mission and structure remained strong. For at least the first two years of its existence, years in which Ella Baker continued to play an active role, SNCC gathered periodically to revisit and to explore their collective purposes. The "marathon meetings" that inevitably ensued always included Baker's quiet and unobtrusive presence. She rarely contributed a view of her own, but participated most often as a listener and occasionally as a questioner. Comparing her to Nelson Mandela, Grant (1998) explained that Baker listened closely and actively to every person and would occasionally refer to a previous speaker's words to lend them added credibility and weight. She regularly paraphrased and synthesized what others had said, and taught the young people in SNCC "that everyone had something to give, thus helping them learn to respect each other" (p. 137).

Baker also participated by questioning students with a masterful Socratic persistence. She would not tell them what to do, but she would interrogate participants repeatedly about purpose and mission. As Mary King (1987), an early SNCC volunteer, noted, "Again and again, she would force us to articulate our assumptions" (p. 60). Mary King sometimes felt intimidated by Baker's methods, but she came to see that her questioning was a strategy to combat dogmatism. Only through persistent and sharply worded questioning, Mary King learned, could the temptation to adopt a single, doctrinaire approach be avoided. She attributed to Baker one of the most important lessons of her life. "There are many legitimate and effective avenues for social change and there is no single right way" (Payne, p. 97).

Baker's approach to leading, which was inseparable from her approach to teaching and learning, stemmed from her belief that the students must have control over their own decision making. This was especially true of the SNCC students, who believed that overbearing adults would only hamper efforts to keep the movement energized. But they would listen to those rare adults who treated them as equals and who regarded the students as responsible thinkers and doers. This was exactly Ella Baker's view, which is why the students prized her leadership. As Bob Moses said recalling Ella Baker's legacy for SNCC:

It was Ella more than anyone else who gave us the space to operate in. As long as she was sitting there in the meetings, no one else could dare come in and say I think you should do this or that, because no one could pull rank on her. Her stature was such that there wasn't anyone from the NAACP to Dr. King who could get by her. I think that the actual course of the SNCC movement is a testimony to the fact that the students were left free to develop on their own. That was her real contribution. (Dallard, pp. 84-5)

Joanne Grant (1998) pointed out that, although Baker spurned the profession of teaching as a vocational aspiration, her chief role with SNCC turned out to be as teacher. She wanted to develop new leaders and there was no way to do this except through some form of instruction. Of course, Baker employed a variety of forms to support and guide the students – listening, affirming, questioning, and, only rarely, asserting. But these were all aspects of her teaching role. Baker was a fount of wisdom and experience for the students of SNCC. As time went on, her ability to teach, facilitate, and redirect the students toward more productive, generous, and humane goals grew into legend. It was out of such encounters that her reputation as *Fundi* developed.

### Baker's Developmental Leadership

Throughout her life, but especially as "founding mother" of SNCC, Baker espoused and practiced a philosophy of what Payne (1995) and Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock (1997) have called developmental leadership. It left little room for charismatic, top-down influence. Despite the many opportunities she had to further her fame, she stayed behind the scenes, supporting and nurturing her fellow activists and organizers, never seeking recognition for herself. Baker embraced a highly collaborative approach to leadership in which individuals did not take credit or accept responsibility for their actions alone, but instead alternated between leader and follower for the sake of the general welfare. She discouraged leaders who thirsted for acclaim, who were animated by glory and power, urging them instead to revel in the accomplishment of collective goals. Yet, Baker was also the first to defend anyone possessing the courage to take a principled stand against the group when doing so for the group's sake. Defiance can be admirable when selfless, she seemed to say, but destructive when carried out merely for self-aggrandizement.

Baker's (1972) notion of group-centered, developmental leadership stressed learning, interdependence, and self-sufficiency. Traditional leadership makes followers dependent on leaders, stripping followers of the resources to learn from their experiences and to make decisions for themselves. Developmental leadership assumes each person is indispensable, all group members are potential leaders and learners, and, as Baker herself has affirmed, such leaders "cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves" (p. 347). Self-sufficiency was her goal for everyone, which also meant that people must be free to make mistakes, to choose a misguided course of action and to learn from its consequences. Such circumstances were necessary to allow civil rights workers to grow as learners and leaders. At a time when large, consolidated organizations were the norm, Baker believed that people must take control over their own lives by acting within relatively small organizational environments. Organizations must be small enough, Baker assumed, for people to get to know one another by name, to get to know one another as persons. Payne (1995) has noted that Baker "envisioned small groups of people working together but also retaining contact in some form with other such groups, so that coordinated action would be possible wherever large groups really were necessary" (p. 369). Only then, she believed, could the nurturing of both individual and collective growth occur.

Baker (1972) insisted that "what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people" (352). Witnessing young people emerge as leaders—in part as a result of her specific efforts—gave her life meaning and purpose. Seeing them furthermore develop the values and principles upon which real democracy is based fueled her hope. These were truly the things she lived for. In an interview with historian Gerda Lerner she said:

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 a new life as a result of it. (Baker, 1972, p. 352)

## Conclusion – Leading as Teaching, Learning, Transforming and Developing

There is no question that Ella Baker met the multiple tests of transformational leadership that Burns (1978) delineates in his groundbreaking book - *Leadership*. This is particularly remarkable, as she successfully exercised leadership in multiple settings decades before Burns put forward his theory. Yet, leaders like Baker, females who did much of the behind-the-scenes work that made possible the accomplishments of more high-profile leaders, usually male, receive virtually no attention in Burns's book. Ella Baker was a leader who formed long-term relationships with her co-workers and who worked constantly to redistribute power by helping people to emerge as leaders themselves. As a self-actualized person, Baker was not threatened by others seeking to come forward as leaders. Like other transformational leaders, Baker exhorted her followers to express their commitments to justice and equality openly and passionately, and to allow these commitments to carry them forward toward assertive action. She reminded civil rights workers that their struggle was a struggle for freedom loving people everywhere. Furthermore, Baker was a towering example of dignity and decency herself. She embodied the principles she espoused and inspired others to do the same.

It is in fact striking how closely Baker paralleled the expectations Burns held for transformational leaders. She lived the idea that leadership is collective. She was one of the leading advocates of group-centered leadership, of the idea that the strongest, most effective leadership is something held in common by the group and is best carried out by the group itself. She heartily endorsed the notion that leadership is dissensual and went out of her way to foster discussions among leaders and followers that included heavy doses of constructive disagreement and creative conflict. She affirmed that the clash of differences, when carefully controlled and constructively expressed, enhances learning and stimulates group growth. She also believed that leadership is causative. It can make a difference, change people's minds, and get them to think and act more generously for the good of the whole. Similarly, she practiced morally purposeful leadership by supporting people to pursue those goals that would help them flourish as human beings. These things included most notably – opportunities to learn, opportunities to lead, and opportunities to change a system that undermined human dignity. Finally, Baker's leadership was elevating. It gave people new hope that they had the ability and the power collectively to renew the world.

While Burns's theory of transformational leadership explains a great deal about the influence Baker exercised, Payne's (1995) and Belenky, Bond, and Weinstock's (1997) theory of developmental leadership also casts light on some of the contributions made by this American *Fundi*. Transformational leadership, despite its many insights, may put too much emphasis on the individual leader. Ella Baker's genius was in using leadership to decenter leaders, to redistribute power from one person to many persons and, in so doing, to help people gain the resources, acquire the learning, and develop the confidence to go out and support the development of others in their own communities.

Baker was a strong presence wherever she went. She was respected and even revered by many. But the source of her leadership had nothing to do with the sort of mystical aloofness or charismatic distance we associate with more traditional leaders. Her leadership focused on relationships, on getting to know people on a first name basis, and on finding out directly from them what they cared about most. But, like any great teacher, her desire to know people through conversation and active listening and close observation of their actions was not a good in itself. It was the means by which she attempted to develop their latent abilities and help them to see that their individual and collective empowerment were within their own control.

As Barbara Ransby has so eloquently pointed out, Baker was also a practitioner of dialogic teaching and learning as espoused by Paulo Freire. Both "viewed education as a collective and creative enterprise requiring collaboration and exchange at every stage (2003, p. 362)." Both believed in the power of simple humility and close listening, embracing the wise notion that "silence in the context of communication is fundamental" (2003, p. 362). Ransby also quotes organizer Prathia Hall, a protégé of Baker's, who recalls sitting on the porches of the poor people whom she sought to register to vote in rural Georgia. "We'd sit and we'd listen, and we'd listen to the person talk about survival and talk about families...I think some of the most important lessons I learned were on the porches of people who couldn't read or write their names" (2003, p. 362). One can't help thinking that Ella Baker and Paulo Freire, too, would have been very proud of how Prathia Hall nurtured relationships with the Black people of rural Georgia and learned from their experiences.

In an influential essay about building a foundation for a strong, democratic society, Benjamin Barber (1998) concurs with Baker that it is not strong leaders, but strong organizational members that are most needed. Leaders are at their best as facilitators, moderators, and head-listeners. Leaders who are scrupulous listeners work to ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute something valuable to the group. For the leader, to lead through listening means "not to scan an

adversary's position for weaknesses or potential trade-offs, (p. 108)" but to support each participant in empathizing with all others, "to discover in the babble of voices a consensus that is audible only to the scrupulous auditor (p. 108)." The effective facilitator as leader "wishes to transform all the He's and She's who come into the meeting with their own interests into a single We with a common interest (p. 108)." Such a leader "will insist that every [participant] be heard, but by that [the leader] will mean not only that all can speak but that all must listen" (p. 108).

According to Howard Gardner (1995), leaders tell a recurring story that reveals the identity of the leader, underscores group goals, and highlights the values that the group both espouses and enacts. Such stories help the group to understand "who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed" (p. 43). Furthermore, the values embedded in the story that the leader conveys are embodied or lived by that leader on a daily basis.

The story Ella Baker related was one of ordinary people working together for social change to further racial justice and enhance human dignity. As a leader, she remained offstage doing all she could to support others in assuming leadership roles. Rarely making decisions herself, she worked quietly to create environments for people to take charge of their own lives and to make choices that shaped how they would live together. She prized freedom and fairness and respect and strived to model these ideals in all of her interactions with others. Perhaps most of all she esteemed continuous learning and deepened understanding as the twin bases for authentic transformation.

In a statement to her followers that parallels almost exactly Gardner's claims about the leader's story, Ella Baker succinctly put forward her own leadership narrative. It also brings us full circle, because it reminds us in no uncertain terms how Ella Baker fulfilled her role as the *Fundi* of the Civil Rights Movement. She encouraged her followers to foment radical change, but only after cultivating a thorough understanding of the tragedies and triumphs and trials of the past:

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. That is easier said than done. But one of the things that has to be faced is...to find out who we are, where we have come from and where we are going...I am saying as you must say, too, that in order to see where we are going, we not only must *remember* where we have been, but we must *understand* where we have been. (Quoted in Moses and Cobb, p. 3)

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