

Introduction

Not long after Myles Horton died in 1990, activist Anne Braden paid tribute to Horton for his commitment to doing “the impossible.” As she saw it, establishing the Highlander Folk School in 1932 in the depths of the Great Depression and in a profoundly impoverished part of rural Tennessee epitomized the impossible. Just as improbably, Horton chose to make Highlander a center for adult learning where subjugated southern workers, both black and white, could meet in a spirit of equality and mutual respect. Few places in the world were as inhospitable to workers’ rights and racial justice as the rural South in the 1930s. Jim Crow segregation engulfed the region, and workers who organized for higher wages and better working conditions risked being branded as Communists. Braden called it an impossible mission at an impossible time. Nor did she underestimate its perils: “One did not challenge the South’s ‘way of life’ without risking one’s own life in the process.”¹

“From the beginning,” sociologist Aldon Morris affirmed, “Highlander was a rarity. In the midst of worker oppression, racism, and lynchings, Highlander unflinchingly communicated to the world that it was an island of decency that would never betray its humanitarian vision.”² Somehow, despite the implausibility of their quest, Horton and his Highlander colleagues persisted. In time, the southern

workers did gain greater control over their lives, in part due to Highlander's efforts, and after many years of trying to bring integrated groups together without success, Highlander finally became one of the few places in the South where blacks and whites could rely on encountering one another as equals. When Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leader John Lewis attended a Highlander workshop in 1960, the extent of the integration stunned him: "This was the first time in my life that I saw black people and white people not just sitting down together at long tables for shared meals, but also cleaning up together afterward, doing the dishes together, gathering together late into the night in deep discussion and sleeping in the same cabin dormitories."³ To Anne Braden, Horton and his colleagues were able "to attempt the impossible because they were gripped by a vision of a new kind of society . . . in which there would be justice for all."⁴

As director of Highlander over the course of some forty years, Horton had a hand in fueling two of the twentieth century's greatest social movements: the crusade for organized labor and the freedom struggle for civil rights. Because of Highlander, thousands of people gained the determination and the skills to make change for the common good in their communities. At the heart of Highlander's educational approach stood its commitment to democracy, which Horton saw as much more than casting a ballot or majority rule. For him, it meant nothing less than carving out a "free space" for people to learn, play, and work together and to gain greater control over their collective lives.⁵

In his 1952 book *South of Freedom*, which examined life under Jim Crow, black journalist Carl Rowan identified a handful of white southerners actively working for racial justice. Horton was one of these. Rowan admired him for spearheading one of the few meeting places in the South that insisted on racial integration, and for being willing to denounce "racial segregation" as "the root and perpetrator of all the evils" plaguing the South.⁶ Forty-eight years later, when

C-Span founder Brian Lamb asked philosopher and social activist Cornel West which white person in American history, male or female, “was most sympathetic to changing racial differences,” West responded, without hesitation, “Myles Horton.” He called Horton an “indescribably courageous and visionary white brother from Tennessee.”⁷ Later, West also said Horton was “one of the great existential democrats of the twentieth century in terms of understanding democracy as a way of life.”⁸

In November 2016, leaders in the Black Lives Matter movement chose the Highlander Research and Education Center as the site for an important organizational gathering because they knew about Highlander’s relentless commitment to social justice. They knew that Highlander had fearlessly taken the side of the disempowered and the dispossessed for over eighty years. And they knew that when the civil rights movement reached its height, Highlander remained one of the few places in the South that embraced freedom fighters like Rosa Parks, Septima Clark, Ella Baker, Dorothy Cotton, Andrew Young, and Dr. Martin Luther King. All came to Highlander to continue the struggle for human rights, and all aligned themselves with Highlander in promoting participatory democracy and social change from the bottom up. Highlander’s legacy lives on in the hearts of some of America’s most dedicated racial justice activists.⁹

I met Myles Horton just once, when he was a guest speaker in a community organizing class at Carleton College taught by Paul Wellstone, later the two-term U.S. senator from Minnesota. It was the mid-1980s and I was an assistant professor of education at Carleton, where I had gotten to know Wellstone fairly well. He knew of my interest in Highlander and so encouraged me to sit in. Wellstone’s emphasis on fostering social change was a perfect opportunity for Horton to share his favorite yarns about his work at Highlander. None of the students had ever heard of Horton or Highlander, but they quickly warmed to his folksy manner and irrepressible sense of

humor. He loved to laugh and did so a lot, mainly in response to his own jokes and anecdotes. I remember, too, the affectionate bantering between Horton and Wellstone. It was clear they knew each other well and had worked together many times as activists. But Horton wasn't all smiles. He became deadly serious when he talked about how much work needed to be done to make the United States an authentic democracy. He said that democracy wasn't working at all, not just in Appalachia, but throughout the country. And until people found the strength, confidence, and spirit of unity to take charge of their lives and their communities, change would not happen.

Horton's eyes were lively and his wit was sharp, but he also seemed to tire easily—he was over eighty at the time—and would soon be diagnosed with cancer. When he and I were alone together for a few minutes after the class was over, I asked him about his biggest influences. I mentioned John Dewey, but he said George S. Counts was much more important to him, because when he was young he was such a bold advocate for radical change. He said Karl Marx was also a key influence, because Marx gave him the tools for understanding what he was reading and what he was up against in opposing powerful interests that didn't seem to care much about people in need. He also asked me a lot of questions about what I hoped to accomplish as an educator. When I responded that part of my goal was to follow his example, he laughed, partly because he didn't see himself as a role model and partly because he doubted I could accomplish much as a professor at an elite college. When I brought up Wellstone, he smiled serenely and then added: "Paul Wellstone is one in a million. Few, if any, can do what he does in working-class communities and still hang on at a college like this." I nodded without saying anything, perhaps because we both knew how close Wellstone had come to losing his position at Carleton near the beginning of his career, and how much tension remained between him and many of his colleagues. I wanted our time together to

go on indefinitely, but Horton was late for a meeting in the Twin Cities and he was pretty much talked out. When the campus visit was over, I watched Wellstone and Horton say goodbye to one another with a warm embrace. Horton waved and urged me to come to Highlander. I never did.

Horton was a Tennessee native, born and bred in the western part of the state. Although he later traveled a great deal, raising money and enlisting allies to keep Highlander alive, he remained in rural Tennessee for the rest of his life. When asked why he planted his roots so firmly in Tennessee, he called it the region he knew and loved best. He looked on Tennessee as the place where he could make the biggest difference in people's lives, because it was under his skin, inseparable from how he saw himself as a person and an activist. Years later, Horton observed that he never wanted to create a school for the United States as a whole. He wanted to open a school for a specific place with specific boundaries, a place known as Appalachia. "I was trying to think of a school for people I knew . . . the largest number of poor white people in the United States; people who had some semblance of a tradition and background. . . . I knew there was a certain distinctiveness that grew partially out of poverty and partially out of isolation, and partly out of the background of people who came here."¹⁰

My background could not have been more different from Horton's. I am the product of a well-to-do family that settled in a prosperous Chicago suburb in the early 1950s. My father worked as an executive for a successful electronics company and my mother, who had earned a law degree, stayed home to care for my two brothers and me. I had virtually no adversity in my life. I attended a public high school that in many ways was the equivalent of an elite private academy. And although I didn't end up attending Ivy League schools or accumulating a lot of money, I never really lacked for anything. I grew up in a lovely and peaceful community, but I felt no tie to it,

leaving it for good almost as soon as I could. Throughout my life, I have enjoyed enormous advantages as a white male heterosexual professor who had very little sense of what it was like to be poor or black or female or gay in the oppressive atmosphere of post-World War II America. While I never quite qualified as part of the one percent, I benefited from an immensely privileged position in one of the world's most privileged societies and understood almost nothing about the adversity faced by so many others.

I first learned about Myles Horton many years ago, when I discovered a two-hour television interview conducted by Bill Moyers to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the school Horton had started back in 1932.¹¹ When I first viewed the Moyers interview, Horton's respect for ordinary people and his uncompromising commitment to creating a truly equitable society astonished me. Who was this man who believed so totally in the ability of the person next door, whoever she or he was, to become a leader and learn how to change the community's life for the better? When Moyers asked what idea set Highlander apart from other schools, Horton replied, somewhat haltingly, that Highlander "believed in people." In another context, Horton called Highlander a "faith venture," not because its directors had faith in a method or a clever approach, but owing to their faith in people, above all.¹² He went on to say that Highlander always put people ahead of institutions or structures and that this first principle of prioritizing people made powerful learning possible, allowing them to realize that the answers to their problems resided inside of them. They just needed encouragement and time to reflect on their experiences and a few strategies to bring those answers to the surface. As Horton put it in 1968, "We have felt that people, especially poor adults, who had been denied opportunities for full development had a capacity that was untapped and if you could find some way to get people turned on and give them confidence that they had something to say about their own lives they would come up with some creative

answers and activities.”¹³ In order to live this philosophy, Highlander found that it needed to erase the line between teachers and students. While the staff or teachers might have more formal knowledge or book learning, Horton found that the so-called students often had “deeper insights into human relationships . . . [and] a better understanding of how to deal with people, like themselves.”¹⁴

While watching that Horton video, I recalled my own experiences in schools as a bored, disengaged student. Because of my dissatisfaction with the education I had received, I started out as a middle school teacher who wanted to turn all that boredom around and singlehandedly rouse my students to life. Unfortunately, I failed more often than I succeeded, and I could feel myself often falling back on the very same didactic methods that had so often put me to sleep as a student. Somehow, I wanted to incorporate Horton’s far more liberating approach into my own teaching practice, or, at the very least, come to understand it better.

At that time, the best source on Horton and Highlander was Frank Adams’s 1975 book *Unearthing Seeds of Fire: The Idea of Highlander*, a work that continues to be required reading for those determined to know Highlander and Horton more deeply. As a close collaborator of Horton’s and former Highlander staff member, Adams might have been inclined to overpraise the school, but I took heart from Adams’s own up-front admission of bias. Furthermore, I was drawn to Adams’s belief that “education must be born from the creative tension between how life is lived and how life might be lived in a free society.”¹⁵ Was that the underlying idea Horton and Adams had in mind? I tore into Adams searching for answers. As I read, I quickly recognized that “the idea of Highlander” encompassed many ideas. Encouraging people to gain greater control over their lives by keeping the focus on their actual experiences emerged as one key idea. Another involved resisting individualism and embracing group learning in a residential setting. Still another emphasized identifying