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BY DOROTHY COTTON
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We're on a Journey, and the Journey Continues

Note: For audio of Dr. Cotton's full address, please visit <http://j.mp/AASLH-Cotton>

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My job at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) started with a rickety old bus and a driver named Esau Jenkins. On John's Island, off the coast of Charleston, South Carolina, a white man shot and killed a young black boy because the boy ran over his dog. The people on John's Island did nothing. They did not rise up in righteous indignation. And the fellow who was using this old school bus to drive people back and forth to work, from the islands to Charleston, the mainland, was Esau Jenkins. He knew the people didn't rise up because they had no political power. So Esau began putting the application forms for voter registration on the front of that bus as he was driving because he knew that something was wrong that people didn't feel empowered to say or do anything in response to the shooting.

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As director of education for the SCLC, it was my job to take the program that they were shutting down at the Highlander Folk School, which meant primarily helping people with literacy training. We inherited the program from Highlander and we enhanced the curriculum. We were bringing people from all the islands around Charleston, going into cities, telling them about our training classes, saying, "We have this program, and we have funds. We can take care of your travel. We can take care of your

food.” They would stay five days, participating in a citizenship education workshop. This program did so much to facilitate our having massive numbers of people across the southern states who joined a movement and began to work in a way that changed this country.

I want to share what could happen with people we recruited, every month, forty, fifty, sixty people at a time. The people who came into those citizenship educational workshops came in because there was a rumbling. There was a feeling. There was a sense that we had to change the system. And it was spreading like wildfire, as the saying goes, all over. Andrew Young, Septima Clark, I, and many others would

member asking the group, “What is a citizen?” And people would say, “Well, if you love God, if you don’t break the law, if you treat your neighbor right,” answers like that. Occasionally somebody would say, “Oh yes, and the Constitution,” and that word would go up on the chalkboard. Many of them had minimal education, but they were powerful leaders and motivators in their towns. They started to sit a little taller when they realized that no state could take away their rights as citizens. One day I called Dr. King and asked him to come over and give the workshop participants a sendoff. Dr. King told them, “Nobody can ride your back if your back’s not bent. It’s a terrible thing



AASLH, Dement Studio Photographer

“ *By the third day people were sitting a little taller. They were no longer singing the old sorrow songs. They were beginning to really understand what political power was. They knew they had to vote.* ”

travel around the South, asking, “Will you come?”

This is the story of this training program that doesn’t get talked about. People would come into the workshops and we would talk about the problems they were struggling with. I will never forget Fannie Lou Hamer coming to a workshop. She was from Ruleville, Mississippi. I asked her to introduce the three or four people that she had brought with her from the Mississippi Delta. She said, “Well, Ms. Cotton, I want you to know I’m happy to do that, but first I’ve got to share with you what we are going through.” She shared it by singing one of the old sorrow songs. She had a big, booming voice. Soon she had the whole group singing, “I been in the storm so long / I been in the storm so long, children / I been in the storm so long, give me a little time to pray.” Her husband was going to take her to the next town because they had been threatened with eviction from that little shack of a house they had on that plantation. And he took her to the next county for protection. One day she called him and said, “I want you to come get me. I’m not going to run any more.”

My main session in the citizenship education program was about just that, citizenship, civic functioning. I re-

when a society so structures itself that it treats one segment of the population as though it is less than other people. But it’s even worse when that group of people internalize that definition of themselves as being less than other people, that it even shows in their manner.”

That’s what this training program was all about, this historical event that helped change this country. By the third day, participants were not stooped any more. They were not feeling like victims because they had discovered the Fourteenth Amendment. As long as it’s just on paper, it can read like a poem, but until they brought it alive and made it operative in their lives, change was going to happen only if they made it happen. By the third day people were sitting a little taller. They were no longer singing the old sorrow songs. They were beginning to really understand what political power was. They knew they had to vote.

Things can change. Things have changed. Today, there are people who feel powerless, and who do not see the vote as a meaningful tool for change. As long as we have massive numbers of folks saying that, the wonderful documents on which this country was founded will mean nothing. We have to bring life to them, like those people who had to discover

that the Fourteenth Amendment meant them. If they had not understood that, we'd still be riding on the back of the bus. But when you no longer feel like a victim, you claim your power.

We're on a journey, and the journey continues. We made some inroads, but it's not fixed yet. Where are we going from here? We're not "there" yet. Where is "there?" What historical event will people be studying when we are long gone from the planet, what will they be studying, what will they be looking at that you brought to the scene? Wherever "there" is, if you think about the end in a very positive way, we are not "there" yet because xenophobia is rampant; because there's too much crime and too much punishment, rather than teaching and exposing young people to models of positive values; because we still need to accept our calling as engaged citizens; because our educational system needs overhauling; because we too readily think that we can solve problems by going to war, not allowing ourselves to understand nonviolence; because we have not yet learned to have respectful dialogue with those who have different opinions. We are too often ignorant of the fact that wonderful growth can occur if we allow ourselves to really hear each other.

Suppose we felt strongly about seeing something that's not right and deciding that we are going to do something about it. Imagine having people come alive with the thought, with the sense, with the feeling, that there is something that they can do. If we don't do anything, if we don't recognize our power and our obligations as citizens, if we

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don't put some energy into it, then who will? We know that no one person can fix everything. Imagine 100 years from now.

Pretend you are a bird flying over, and you look down and you see everything working beautifully. Senior citizens are respected and taken care of. School systems are inspiring children to learn, and teachers are inspired to teach. As you look down, you see people on their way to Yale, not to jail. How did that transformation take place? What did you do? When people study the history of our time, they will remember us because of the footprints that we left on the planet. And you will look down, and you will know that you had something to do with making it beautiful. It calls to mind the spiritual, "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder." Vincent Harding wrote some new words to it: "We are climbing Jacob's ladder / we are building up a new world / builders must be strong / courage, sisters, don't get weary / courage, brothers, don't get weary / courage, people, don't get weary / though the road be long / rise, shine, give God the glory, three times / children of the light." ◎

Dorothy Cotton was Education Director for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference for twelve years. She served on Dr. King's executive staff and was part of his entourage to Oslo, Norway, where he received the Nobel Peace Prize. Currently she is involved in the expansion of the National Citizenship School with Civic Organizing, Inc. of Minnesota. Her upcoming book focuses on lessons from the SCLC citizenship education program and her work with Dr. King.



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