

Myles Horton and the Highlander^{*}

Myles Horton was the first of four children, born in 1905 into a poor white family at Paulk's Mill outside of Savannah in West Tennessee. His parents were former school teachers and Presbyterians, both from families who had lived in Tennessee for many generations. Myles's father, Perry, having had a grammar school education, had secured a job as a county official, while his mother, Elsie, was a respected and active member of the community. Myles attended the elementary school at nearby Brazil, and completed eighth grade, which was as far as the school went. Thanks to help from a family friend he was able to enter the nearby Cumberland Presbyterian College in the autumn of 1924, where he would receive religious training. It was here also that Horton read Shelley. From Shelley, Horton learnt that it was right to stand up to authority in support of social justice, and never to be afraid of punishment or to submit to the temptation of rewards. While still working his way through college, he came under fire for agitating amongst factory workers and was involved in a number of social justice issues. He also read Marx.

It was then that I discovered about Marxism and analysis of society on a class basis. ... So I found from Marx that I could get tools, not blueprints, tools that I could use for analyzing society. That helped me to analyze. Then I had to get a synthesis of my religious background and my understanding of economic forces. (Horton, 2003)

During the summer breaks, Horton had been running a Bible class for children for the Presbyterian Church in Ozone, Tennessee. In 1927, he expanded his class to include adults, and attracted an ever expanding crowd to a program of community education in which he encouraged participants to share their problems and through discussion and talks by invited experts, seek solutions to these problems. The residents of Ozone appreciated him so much they urged Horton to forego his last year of college and stay on teaching at Ozone. But Horton was well aware of his own limitations, and promising the community that he would return, set off on a journey to discover how real social change could be achieved through education.

First came his own education. A local Congregationalist minister, Abram Nightingale, helped Horton work his way through a reading program covering the history and culture of the South, the social problems of Appalachia and the moral issues of modern capitalism. In the summer of 1929, Nightingale persuaded Horton to apply to the elite Union Theological Seminary in New York. To his own surprise, Horton was accepted. Here he came under the radical socialist theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who was to become his lifelong friend, mentor and supporter.

After completing his course at the seminary in 1930, he attended the University of Chicago where took classes with Robert Park and learned about group problem solving and conflict resolution and acquainted himself with the ideas of John Dewey. Horton continued to read and toured the country, studying utopian communities, community education projects and Native American communities. He became convinced that utopian communities which cut themselves off from the wider community were of little value in achieving social change. He also visited Jane Addams at Hull House on several occasions, but nothing he saw satisfied him. He completely rejected the conception of

^{*} Excerpt from "The Origins of Collective Decision Making" by Andy Blunden.

vocational education, which, like school education, was intended only to fit people into the status quo, and he was hostile to programs which served to “educate people out of their class.” None of these projects had any potential to effect social change.

He had read about the Danish folkehøjskoler, and in 1931, travelled to Denmark with Don West to see if these Folk Schools lived up to their reputation. He was disappointed, partly because he felt that the spirit which had animated the early folkehøjskoler had been lost, and partly because he realized that the folkehøjskoler belonged to a certain times and a certain culture and could not be transplanted into twentieth century America. Nonetheless he noted with approval the following features of the folkehøjskoler all of which he was later to adopt at the Highlander Folk School:

Students and teachers living together;

Peer learning;

Group singing;

Freedom from state regulation;

Non-vocational education;

Freedom from examinations;

Social interaction in non-formal setting;

A highly motivating purpose;

Clarity in what for and what against. (Horton, 1990, p. 52-53)

Before returning home he wrote to himself:

What you must do is go back, get a simple place, move in and you are there. The situation is there. You start with this and let it grow. You know your goal. It will build its own structure and take its own form. You can go to school all your life, you'll never figure it out because you are trying to get an answer that can only come from the people in the life situation.

(Horton, 2003, p. 3)

Horton returned to Tennessee and was given a farmhouse in Monteagle, in Grundy County – one of the poorest counties in the USA, where he established the Highlander Folk School in 1932, in the depths of the Great Depression.

Highlander

Horton was clear from the outset about the motivating purpose of his project:

From the start it was aimed at reaching southern workers who would be willing to build a new social order. We wanted to use education as a tool to bring about social change in the South. ... I thought there ought to be a revolution in this country. (2003, pp. 8 & 125)

There were three components to Highlander's programs. Firstly, they delivered community education, much like what he had been doing in Ozone years before, for the local community in Monteagle. As a result of this service he earned the loyalty of the community, and when Highlander was firebombed, raided by the police or the Ku Klux Klan, witch-hunted in the press, shot at and subject to all manner of slander and legal attack, the community stuck by them. But this component was never going to bring about social change.

The second component was the residential program. Horton actively engaged with organizations in the region, in the early days, mainly the labour unions, and encouraged them to send to Highlander emerging grass-roots leaders – not people who were on the

union payroll and owed allegiance to the bureaucracy, but shop-floor people whose loyalties remained with their peers. Students would come typically for two or three weeks and over time they built up to classes of 20 or 30 students.

The third component was what he called the extension program. This entailed taking the Highlander staff and students out to picket lines or whatever struggles were going on at the time and doing whatever they could to help. This included actively participating in picketing, research, fund-raising and publicity as well as running Highlander-type courses on the picket lines, including singing and dramatics as well as discussion groups. Workers from these struggles would then be selected on the same kind of criteria as for the residential courses, and brought back to Highlander for a few days or longer if possible.

When students left Highlander, and went back to their organizations, in 90% of cases they took up full-time leadership positions. Highlander maintained contact with them and continued to help them work through the problems they were dealing with. By this means, Horton and the Highlander built up a network of support which could be called upon when required. They knew everyone and everything that was going on in the South, and their reputation in the labour movement grew accordingly.

Highlander also had at any given time some graduate students, typically from Northern universities, working with Highlander for research or practicum. Everyone at Highlander, without exception, participated in every activity on an absolutely equal footing with everyone else. This included both the manual work needing to be done about the farm (money was so short, growing their own food was obligatory and there were no salaries paid), discussion and participation in struggles during the extension program.

The history of Highlander is marked out by a succession of projects. At a certain point, Highlander let go of a program that they had been running, and handed it over to the organizations to run on their own behalf, rather than by sending recruits to Highlander. Then Horton would intensively research a new domain of activity, often leaving Highlander for extended periods to go and live and work and organize in an area, before launching a new project. Horton was able to anticipate with remarkable success the emergence of new social movements and the fact is that his programs could only work in close connection with a growing social movement.

The first project, beginning in 1932, growing slowly under terribly difficult conditions, was work amongst the poorest stratum of workers in the labour movement. The CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations, originally Committee for Industrial Organization – dedicated to general unionism as opposed to craft unionism) was founded in 1935, and Highlander was subsequently accepted as their official educational arm. That is, Horton started working with the hitherto unorganized sections of the working class just as the move towards industrial unionism was emerging, and three years before the American Federation of Labor set up the Committee for Industrial Organization.

In the mid-1940s, Horton began to hand the union education program back to the CIO unions and turned to the poor farmers in the South in collaboration with the National Farmers' Union, 90% of whose members were in the North. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he turned to the movement against racial segregation, a few years before the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case was heard in the Supreme Court, and their unanimous finding announced on May 17 1954 triggered the school desegregation struggle.

The Civil Rights Movement grew out of this struggle, and well before the Birmingham Bus Boycott in 1955, Highlander was deeply involved with all those who were to become leading activists. In the mid-1960s, they handed their education program back to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to run themselves and turned back to where they had started from, to address the problems of poverty in Appalachia, and an array of cooperative ventures emerged as a result of their work.

The program which Highlander ran for the labour movement in the first years had something approximating to a curriculum. The core curriculum was labour economics, labour history, public speaking, union tactics, dramatics, labour journalism and what they called 'parliamentary law', i.e., formal meeting procedure. From 1937, they used the ACWA (Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America) rule book and a mock AFofL Convention held at the end of each term to teach meeting procedure. Myles Horton ran classes on union problems, including organizing methods, strike tactics and race relations. Participants would write and produce a short play on a labour theme and role-play negotiating a union contract.

However, Horton became dissatisfied with this program: "We were giving answers to questions they didn't have," and went on to develop the unique approach which led to Highlander becoming arguably the greatest force for social change in the South.

Horton realized that people were coming to Highlander looking for experts who would give them the answers to their problems. But this was never going to work. They had been habituated to regard their own experience and that of their peers as worthless, and yet it was only by analyzing their own experience and taking their own experience as a starting point that they could resolve their problems and learn from it. But they were the experts in their own experience. Horton believed that adults learnt through experience and every adult had something like the same amount of experience: but they needed to learn how to analyze that experience. The staff at Highlander might indeed have a lot of knowledge and solutions to offer, but unless this knowledge arose out of the workers' own experience, it would mean nothing to them. The first task was to get people to voice their problems and talk about their own experience, together with others, including their peers as well as the staff. Very soon others would chime in with similar experiences and people would begin to search for further information about these problems – where they may have arisen in the past, how others had resolved them, and so on as well as seeking background information, such as the relevant legal codes, underlying economic conditions, and so on. Horton said that once people learn to analyze their own experience and that of their peers, ninety per cent of the time they find that what they thought was their problem was not at all, and they begin to dig deeper. Staff were then able, as equals, to share their experience, suggest books where answers may be found, invite experts to come and answer questions which had arisen in the discussion the answers for which were not readily available.

Experts were invited to address classes to provide information about specific problems when the students requested it, but often they were sent home again if their input was not specifically requested by the students. No material was ever introduced except as it arose from a life situation presented for discussion by the students. The students tended to remain convinced that they would have to get the answer from an expert, but even when staff or invited experts believed they had the answer, it would not be provided, nor any suggestion given that they had a solution. The workers had to find the solution to their own problems by analyzing their own experience and pursuing questions that

arose out of the analysis of their own experience. Sometimes staff would put questions to the group, so as to focus the discussion and help the discussion move in a productive direction, but never provided answers; sometimes they would help manage domineering personalities or other difficulties that might put up barriers to discussion, that's all. And of course their experience with running such workshops allowed them to prompt participants in profitable directions with well-aimed questions.

This reliance on the experience of poor people as the source of solutions to their own problems, experience which was as valuable as the experience of any expert, was crucial to the egalitarianism which prevailed at Highlander. People learnt not only to value their own experience and that of their peers but they also came to feel comfortable interacting with middle-class people, academics and so on, as equals, confident in their own knowledge.

Decision making

Horton found that poor people, especially uneducated or young people, or people in minority groups, not only regarded their own knowledge and experience as worthless, but had become habituated to having every important decision in their life made for them, and being told at every point what they should do, to the extent that they were quite incapable of making a decision for themselves, let alone as part of a group. And yet the ability to make a decision, and even more importantly, to make a *collective* decision together with their peers was the very essence of liberation – taking charge of their own lives. Collective decision making was also central to the very meaning of learning.

Learning and decision making are inseparable. People learn from making decisions and learning helps them make decisions. The motivation for decision making, like the motivation for learning, comes through genuine involvement in an undertaking considered worthy of the effort and possible to achieve. ... significant learning proceeds *in the process of shared decision making*. (Horton, 2003, pp. 246-7)

The day-to-day running of the school would be placed in the hands of the students. At the beginning of each residence, the staff would inform the students about what previous students had done and then it would be left to the students to decide everything. The students usually found this situation distressing at first, but staff would refuse to give directions or make suggestions. The same applied to the problems which workers brought with them to Highlander for resolution. There is a story told in which a group of workers involved in a difficult strike had come to Highlander for a weekend residence to discuss their strike, but at a certain point found that they did not know what they were going to do, and demanded of Horton that he tell them what they should do. Horton refused, and a worker put a gun to Horton's head saying that if he didn't tell them what to do he would shoot him. Still Horton would not give way.

So this is what Highlander was doing: teaching poor people to trust their own experience and that of their peers and helping them learn how to analyze that experience and forcing them to take charge of their own lives by participating in the process of collective decision making and taking responsibility for those decisions.

During the first phase of Highlander's work, with the CIO, collective decision making meant forming committees, having meetings and so on and making decisions the way decisions have always been made in the labour movement, by Majority. Horton said that

he never agreed with majority voting, but this is what the workers needed to take charge of their lives in and through the union movement.

Segregation

In the South, segregation had the force of law. Not only that, union activists in the South might even be Klan members. Nonetheless, Horton always made it known to the unions sending members to Highlander that Highlander was an integrated school. Racial segregation increasingly became a barrier to Highlander's objectives, however. Whenever they had tried to build unions, coalitions or virtually anything else, they eventually came up against the barrier of racism. Highlander always stood firm against the pressure to segregate, but for a number of years the unions selected segregated groups to send to Highlander. On one celebrated occasion, Horton invited a black worker to a union class and a member of the KKK whose union was paying for the course objected and demanded that the black worker be excluded. Horton refused and said that if he didn't like it he (the Klan unionist) could leave. Objecting that he had paid for the course, he grumbled, but stayed, and he learnt from the experience; as a union official he later included black members in the groups he sent to Highlander from his own union. Over time, the people coming to Highlander just accepted it. Horton did not make integration a topic of discussion, but people just learnt through the experience of learning together, as Angeline Butler related, eating and working together and sharing bedrooms and bathrooms together, and working towards common goals, that it wasn't so terrible after all.

Between 1932 and 1947, 6,800 students had participated in Highlander residences and over 12,000 workers had participated in extension classes. This work transformed the labour movement in the South, the more so because Highlander graduates invariably moved into leadership positions representing the lowest grades of the proletariat in the South, and they remained in touch with Highlander afterwards. Despite the progress Highlander had made towards integrating the unions, few Highlander graduates believed that integration could be extended beyond the union movement.

The relationship with the conservative CIO leadership was becoming untenable however. Anyone who openly advocated political action beyond the narrow pursuit of union wages and conditions faced expulsion. The CIO responded to the House Unamerican Activities Committee witch-hunt by demanding their affiliates, including Highlander, make declarations of opposition to and dissociation from Communism. Highlander's refusal to comply meant parting ways with the CIO. The responsibility for union education was handed back to the CIO to run for themselves, but the methods developed by Highlander which was encouraging initiative from the ranks of the union movement, were not continued by the CIO. Highlander had gone as far as it could in organizing the lowest ranks of workers in the South into unions; it was time to move on.

The war had created demand for farm produce and the end of the war only increased demand, and Horton determined that it was time to turn to the poor farmers of the South. The next phase of their work was directed at educational work amongst farmers, both black and white, assisting them in developing cooperatives and encouraging the growth of the National Farmers Union.

Highlander was able to use the contacts they had made through their union work to make new contacts with farmers, and after 5 or 6 years working amongst farmers they had built up a broad layer of support amongst both black and white sections of the rural

poor in the South and a large number of cooperative ventures were being operated by farming communities, giving them a degree of independence from the agribusinesses which had always exploited them.

Until 1954 only 10 to 15 percent of students at the school were black, but during the summer of 1954, in the wake of the Supreme Court finding on school segregation, about 50 percent of the workshop participants were black. For the next decade, a majority of those coming to Highlander would be black as Horton became convinced that a social movement was building up in the South.

Horton did not attempt to suppress racial conflict within the school, but the experience of living together and working towards a common goal invariably led to participants accepting the egalitarian and integrated regime at Highlander and they were invariably full of praise for these practices by the time they left.

The Civil Rights Movement

A one-week workshop for the United Furniture Workers of America held in May 1954 included 35 blacks and whites from 16 locals. The course covered the use of formal meeting procedure and all the usual topics of interest to unionists, but they also discussed the importance of union participation in the drive for school desegregation.

At that time, there was a lot of interest in the UN and the new world situation following the end of the war, and Highlander held workshops where people could learn about the United Nations and the progress being made by the National Liberation Movements around the world. Horton particularly sought out blacks who were relatively free of pressure from white people, either because they ran their own businesses serving the black community, or were preachers in the black churches which were all owned by their black congregations.

In August 1954, the bus owner/driver, Esau Jenkins, and the retired schoolteacher, Septima Clark, attended one of these workshops. They came from Johns Island, one of the Sea Islands of South Carolina, one of the most deprived and marginalized areas in the country, where people spoke a dialect incomprehensible to outsiders. Jenkins drove the bus that took people to work on the mainland every day and he had been trying to teach people to read while driving his bus, so they could register to vote. According to the Constitution of South Carolina, poor black people had to prove they could read by reading the Constitution, before they were allowed to vote.

A two-week summer workshop on school desegregation in May 1955 attracted 50 teachers, unionists, students and community leaders, among them Rosa Parks, whose fare to Montevallo had been paid for by the Alabama branch of the NAACP. A July 1955 workshop on the UN was attended by a young beautician, Bernice Robinson, who was inspired to help her cousin, Septima Clark, promote community activity on Johns Island.

The visit of Esau Jenkins, Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson to Highlander led to Highlander's most successful program – the Citizenship Schools, and within a few months of attending Highlander, Rosa Parks triggered the famous Montgomery Bus Boycott, conventionally taken as the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. Rosa Parks had made no plans while at Highlander, but she went home with a different spirit. According to her own testimony Rosa Parks's decision to refuse to give up her seat to a white man and to force the police to arrest her was because at Highlander she had found

respect as a Black person and white people that she could trust. This gave her the courage to insist on being treated with respect and confidence in eventual victory.

After Esau Jenkins raised the problem of voter registration in the Highlander workshop, Highlander took on this project, and Horton spent several months, on and off, in Johns Island, learning the dialect and familiarizing himself with people's lives there. A room was hired and Bernice Robinson was appointed teacher; Bernice was given no direction as to how to teach and had no teaching experience. All she had was what she had learnt at Highlander about treating people with respect and as equals, beginning from their experience and responding to people's problem as they saw them. On 7 January 1957, she stood nervously before her first class and said "I'm not a teacher. I really don't know why they wanted me to do this, but I'm here and I'll learn with you. I'll learn as I go along." She pinned up a copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on the wall and told her students that by the end of the term she wanted them all to be able to read it. She had brought with her reading material from her local elementary school but immediately realized that these were inappropriate for her adult class. Allowing the problems raised by the class to set their program, they worked on writing their own names and moved on to reading the labels on supermarket cans, filling out work docket, filling in the blanks in a mail order catalogue – all those practical everyday tasks which frustrate the illiterate person. In two months the enrolment increased from 14 to 37. The final exam was to go down to County Hall and register to vote. Throughout the program, approximately 80% of the class passed the exam at the end of the approximately three-month term.

Septima Clark was appointed director of the program, which became known as the Citizenship School, and rapidly spread across the South. New teachers were apprenticed to Bernice by observing her at work in the classroom, and these new teachers in turn trained others. By 1961, over four hundred teachers had been trained, and there'd been over four thousand students. By 1970, approximately 100,000 illiterate black people had learnt to read and had registered to vote, and many hundreds of black people, none of them with teaching credentials of any kind, had been trained as teachers by the former beautician Bernice Robinson and her apprentices. Very many of these teachers would go on to become activists in the Civil Rights movement. The program, together with Septima Clark as Director, was subsequently handed over to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to run as their own program.

The runaway success of the Citizenship School was possible only thanks to the fact that there was a revolutionary situation in the South. Horton was able to detect this in its earliest stages and provided the kind of education which not only gave black people the confidence to stand up to the system and offer leadership to their communities, and the knowledge that there were elements of the white population who could be expected to support them, but also the means to analyze their situation and draw on the experience of the black communities in the South to overcome the barriers erected against them.

The first lunch counter sit-in was staged by four black students from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College at the Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, on 1 February 1960. On 1 April 1960, Highlander held its seventh annual college workshop entitled "The New Generation Fights for Equality," the focus of which was demonstrations, college students, and the civil rights movement. Two weeks later, sit-in leaders, many of whom had participated in the Highlander workshop,

met in Raleigh, North Carolina, to form the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).

Here are some of Horton's own words on these events. On nonviolence:

Education per se is nonviolent. ... Our whole approach to life is an educational approach. We can't beat things into people's heads, so in that sense we predate the nonviolent advocacy. ...

The student leaders were influenced primarily by Martin Luther King and people like the Reverend James Lawson, who has been conducting workshops in Nashville. But the first meeting of the sit-inners, which later became the SNCC, was at Highlander, and I remember the discussion very well. In fact, I have some written records of it. On tape I have a speech I made to them at the time. I said: 'I am convinced that these spontaneous student protests mark the beginning of a sustained effort which will lead to fuller participation by Negroes in all phases of economic and political life'. My observation then was that 15 or 20 per cent of the students espoused nonviolence philosophically and for the rest of them it was a matter of going along with what seemed to be the best procedure. (Horton, 2003, p. 148-9)

In relation to formal meeting procedure and majority voting, he made the following criticism of officials of the Democratic Party who effectively excluded black people from participation in the Party:

They never examined their racism which showed itself to me in their assuming that all the structures that white people hold so dear, parliamentary law, majority votes, what I call procedure sort of claptrap, should be held dear by Negroes also. ... Negroes have never mastered that way, their churches don't act that way. The civil rights movement taught white people not to act that way. In the mountains poor people got together and they don't have any Robert's Rules of Order, don't have any procedure. They get together and talk. None of your poor people, Negroes or whites, fit these categories. (Horton, 2003, p. 180-1)

According to Horton, Majority was the mode of decision making used in the American political system and in the labour movement, but it had no inherent virtue. For those excluded from these institutions, which meant not only blacks but also the poor white farmers of Tennessee, these procedures made no sense. Consequently, in implementing Highlander's approach to education which hinged on collective decision making, during the civil rights period, Horton did not use voting and formal meeting procedures, but began from the experience of his students, developed in accordance with strict egalitarian principles and relations which prevailed at Highlander.

At Highlander, we frequently recruited people for workshops on the basis that they had problems in their community and had expressed the desire to talk with other people who had similar problems. Staff members would be available to help, for example, with techniques of keeping discussions properly focused or with bits of factual information. ... In each case significant learning proceeded *in the process of shared decision making*. The participants themselves, in effect, were inventing alternate channels for their own education. ... The civil rights movement in the South demanded precisely this kind of learning made possible by democratic

decision making of the type described. Every time people decided to ride a Freedom Bus, or to sit in at a lunch counter, or to march down a highway, individual learning and conscientization takes place. If they had not, there would have been little determination, little staying power and (probably) insufficient courage. The people would not have developed the sense of potency and worth necessary for sustained militant action. (Horton, 2003, p. 245-6)

Not only were black people and poor whites educated in the use of this kind of decision making, a kind of decision making which arose naturally as an extension of their own experience, but the young white college students who came down to work in solidarity with the black people putting their lives on the line in the sit-ins and Freedom Bus rides, were also trained in this type of decision making which would have been equally novel for them.

Horton does not necessarily have the last word on this. It cannot be assumed from the absence of formal procedures and voting that these poor communities normally practised Consensus. Prior to their experience at Highlander, most of these people would have found making decisions in such a way extremely difficult. Generally speaking deference to one's elders and one's social superiors, both within their own community and at large, would have ruled out the kind of open and egalitarian consensus-seeking which we associate with SNCC-style Consensus. The kind of decision making which was manifested in SNCC was an *extension* of the experience black people had had in their own communities, but it was not identical to it. It was an *invention* marking the transformation of formerly oppressed people into political actors in the life of the nation.

As I see it, when the students went from Highlander into the nonviolence workshops with James Lawson and on to the founding of SNCC, they freely made the decisions, as Mary King reports, about the delegate structure of SNCC and continued on with the decision making practices that they had learnt at Highlander. Lawson immediately recognized that this mode of operating was entirely appropriate to the extremely dangerous nonviolent actions they were planning and continued to foster the practice of Consensus with the students.