

The Danger of Leadership Cults

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No leader, no matter how talented and visionary, effectively defies power without a disciplined organizational foundation. The civil rights movement was no more embodied in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. than the socialist movement was embodied in Eugene V. Debs. As the [civil rights leader Ella Baker](#) understood, the civil rights movement made King; King did not make the civil rights movement. We must focus on building new, radical movements that do not depend on foundation grants, a media platform or the Democratic Party or revolve around the cult of leadership. Otherwise, we will remain powerless. No leader, no matter how charismatic or courageous, will save us. We must save ourselves.

“You didn’t see me on television, you didn’t see news stories about me,” said Baker, who died in 1986. “The kind of role that I tried to play was to pick up pieces or put together pieces out of which I hoped organization might come. My theory is, strong people don’t need strong leaders.”

All of our radical and populist organizations, including unions and the press, are decimated or destroyed. If we are to successfully pit power against power we must reject the cult of the self, the deadly I-consciousness that seduces many, including those on the left, to construct little monuments to themselves. We must understand that it is not about us. It is about our neighbor. We must not be crippled by despair. Our job is to name and confront evil. All great crusades for justice outlast us. We are measured not by what we achieve but by how passionately and honestly we fight. Only then do we have a chance to thwart corporate power and protect a rapidly degrading ecosystem.

What does this mean?

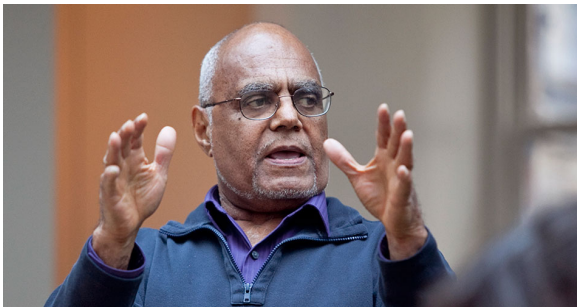
It means receding into the landscape to build community organizations and relationships that for months, maybe years, will be unseen by mass culture. It means beginning where people are. It means listening. It means establishing credentials as a member of a community willing to make personal sacrifices for the well-being of others. It means being unassuming, humble and often unnamed and unrecognized. It means, as [Cornel West](#) said, not becoming “ontologically addicted to the camera.” It means, West went on, rejecting the “obsession with self as some kind of grand messianic gift to the world.”

One of the most important aspects of organizing is grass-roots educational programs that teach people, by engaging them in dialogue, about the structures of corporate power and the nature of oppression. One cannot fight what one does not understand. Effective political change, as Baker knew, is not primarily politically motivated. It is grounded in human solidarity, mutual trust and consciousness. As [Harriet Tubman](#) said:

“I rescued many slaves, but I could have saved a thousand more if the slaves knew they were slaves.”

The corporate state’s assault on education, and on journalism, is part of a concerted effort to keep us from examining corporate power and the ideologies, such as globalization and [neoliberalism](#), that promote it. We are entranced by the tawdry, the salacious and the trivial.

The building of consciousness and mass organizations will not be quick. But these mass movements cannot become public until they are strong enough to carry out sustained actions, including civil disobedience and campaigns of noncooperation. The response by the state will be vicious. Without a dedicated and organized base we will not succeed.



[Bob Moses](#) (image on the right) was the director of the Mississippi Project of the SNCC (Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee) in the early 1960s when that group organized to register black voters. Most blacks had been effectively barred from voting in Mississippi through poll taxes, literacy tests, residency requirements and other barriers. Moses, like many organizers, was beaten and arrested. Blacks who attempted to register to vote were threatened, harassed, fired from their jobs, physically attacked and even murdered.

“In essence, it was low-grade guerrilla warfare,” Moses said recently at an event at Princeton University, in New Jersey. “In guerrilla warfare, you have a community you can disappear into and emerge from. That’s what we had. We had a group of local activists who had been a part of the NAACP local organizations and who had a different sense after World War II. They were our base. I can go any place, any time of the night, knock on a door. Somebody was going to open it up, give me a bed to sleep in, feed me. They were going to watch my back.”

“We had a guerrilla community that we could disappear into and then emerge to take some people down to the battleground, the courthouse in some local town with people trying to register to vote,” he said. “At that point, you were exposed and possibly open to some danger. The danger came in different ways. There were the highway patrols, which the state organized. Then there were the local sheriffs. Then there’s the Klan citizens. Different levels of danger. The challenge is to understand that you are not always in danger. Those who couldn’t figure that out didn’t last. They didn’t join.”

“In guerrilla warfare, you have to have an end,” he said. “You learn that from people in the guerrilla base who had been fighting and figuring out how to survive and thrive in a guerrilla struggle. The only way to learn that is to immerse yourself. There’s no training. In Mississippi, most of the people who did that were young, 17, 18, 19. And they lived there.”

Organizing, Moses said, begins around a particular issue that is important to the community—raising the minimum wage, protecting undocumented workers, restoring voting rights to former prisoners, blocking a fracking site, halting evictions, ending police violence or stopping the dumping of toxic waste in neighborhoods. Movements rise organically. Dissidents are empowered and educated one person at a time. Any insurgency, he said, has to be earned.

“If you get knocked down enough times and stand up enough times then people think you’re serious,” he said. “It’s not you talking. They’ve heard everyone talk about this forever. We earned their trust. We earned the respect of young people across the country to get them to come down and risk their lives. This is your country. Look what’s going on in your country. What do you want to do about it? We established our authenticity.”

Moses warned movements, such as Black Lives Matter, about establishing a huge media profile without a strong organizational base. Too often protests are little more than spectacles, credentialing protesters as radicals or dissidents while doing little to confront the power of the state. The state, in fact, often collaborates with protesters, carrying out symbolic arrests choreographed in advance. This boutique activism is largely useless. Protests must take the state by surprise and, as with the [water protectors at Standing Rock](#), cause serious disruption. When that happens, the state will drop all pretense of civility, as it did at Standing Rock, and react with excessive force.

“You can’t be a media person [the subject of media reports] and an organizer,” Moses said. “If you’re leading an organization, it’s what you do and who you are that impacts the people who you are trying to get to do the organizing work. If what they see is your media presence, then that’s what they also want to have. It’s overwhelming to be a media person in this country. To attend to the duties of being a media person, the obligations that follow a media person, really means that you can’t attend to the obligations of actually doing organizing work. Once SNCC decided it needed a media person, it lost its organizing base. It disintegrated and disappeared. You can’t do both.”

The mass mobilizations, such as the Women’s March, have little impact unless they are part of a campaign centered around a specific goal. The goal—in the case of SNCC, voter registration—becomes the organizing tool for greater political consciousness and eventually a broader challenge to established power. People need to be organized around issues they care about, Moses said. They need to formulate their own strategy. If strategy is dictated to them, then the movement will fail.

“People need to figure out for themselves what they want to do about a problem,” Moses said. They need “agency.” They do not get agency, he said, “by listening to somebody tell them things.”

“They can develop agency by going out and trying things,” he said. “It works, or it doesn’t work. They come back. They think about it. They reformulate it. Staff people are keeping track of what it is, who it is, what they’re working on. They are documenting it. This is the difference between a mobilizing effort, where you’re getting people to turn out for an event, and trying to get people self-engaged and thinking through a problem.”

“When you do civil disobedience, the question is not about the power structure

but the people you're trying to reach," he said. "How do they view what you're doing? Do you alienate them? It's a balance between, in some sense, leading and organizing. When you do your civil disobedience, it may or may not help with expanding your organizing base."

Moses, who believes that only nonviolent resistance will be effective, said the Vietnam anti-war movement hurt itself by not accepting, as the civil rights movement did, prison and jail time as part of its resistance. Many in the anti-war movement, he said, lacked the vital capacity for self-sacrifice. This willingness to engage in self-sacrifice, he said, is fundamental to success.

"The anti-war movement would have had a huge impact if it had been able to agree that what we're going to do is go to prison," he said. "We are going to pay a certain price. We're going to earn our insurgency against the foreign policy establishment of the country. We're going to say no and go to prison. That way, they could have emerged when the war was over as the insurgents who had paid, in their own way, the price of the war."

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