Lift Every Voice

And Sing

Between 1968 and 1991, I worked full-time on the staff of the Institute of Cultural Affairs (ICA) and its predecessor the Ecumenical Institute. A major portion of all the programs we conducted involved demonstrating that every human being had a voice in shaping their own future and the future of the community in which they lived.

In conjunction with the American Bi-centennial Celebration, the ICA conducted a series of Town Meetings. The overall vision for the Town Meeting Campaign called for holding a community forum in every single county of the United States; similar events were held in other countries during the same decade. Several initial events were held in major metropolitan areas to demonstrate the concept. Many of these were organized by city-wide steering committees involving political and civic leaders. These one-day events had full-length workshops in the morning and afternoons with elaborate interludes for lunch and energetic closing celebrations at the end of the day.

Once the major urban centers and many of the smaller towns had conducted their events, teams of people who had participated in these demonstrations set out to complete the task of holding a similar participatory event in each and every county. The magnitude of this undertaking called for several revisions to the original set-up plan as well as a willingness to hold less elaborate events than had occurred in Philadelphia at the outset of the project. Many of the events in this phase were three to four hours in length and were setup by a single group or organization in the community. Nationally, a high-quality four-color workbook had been printed for use in each event. This added an aura of importance to even events with limited participation. In the northeastern part of the United States, the group of us responsible for this geography had completed all of the counties in New England, New York and Pennsylvania, only southern and central Virginia remained. In the late summer of 1976, we converged in Richmond to complete the process of conducting a Town Meeting in each of the 95 counties of Virginia.

Teams of two went into each county to contact people that might be willing to host such an event in their community. In one particular rural county, the first people that were at all interested in the idea were the staff of a home for senior citizens. At the appointed time, Bruce Williams and I, two 30 year-old white men with distinctly northern accents, showed up at the senior citizen’s home which served primarily African Americans from rural Virginia. The staff who had agreed to support the event showed us in to the community room at the facility and the elder residents came in for the program. We two white Yankees had a somewhat difficult time eliciting a vision for the future from the friendly but reluctant participants in the morning workshop.

Then came time for the proscribed interlude. Bruce and I spotted a piano in the corner of the room and asked if anyone could play. One of the older ladies had played for her church and was willing to play a song or two. After a few gospel hymns were sung from memories of days long past, we asked if they knew any of the songs in the center of our nicely printed commemorative workbook. Basically the answer was “No”; and the celebrative mood remained elusive. We then asked if they knew “Lift Every Voice and Sing” – a song which neither of us had heard prior to beginning the Town Meeting Campaign but which we had learned to sing in recent months because we had been told that it was the Black National Anthem. They were surprised to see it in the workbook and even more surprised that we suggested it and knew how it began; but they were more than willing to join in. The pianist began to belt out the tricky melody and two middle age white Yankees and a room full of elderly African Americans found common ground in a song about undying hope.

The mood of the song and the message of never ceasing on the journey of care, carried over into the afternoon workshop. Instead of treating Bruce and I like intruders, we had become colleagues in the quest for a brighter tomorrow.

I will never know for certain what happened to the creative ideas expressed in the workshops in that senior citizens center in rural Virginia. I do know that I will never forget the common bond that emerged when two strangers joined their voices in a song that had long expressed the sentiments of a people that often seemed to be ignored by the majority of society. The song is now included in the hymnal of the Unitarian Universalist church and periodically makes its way into the services at our local congregation in Greensboro, North Carolina. Each time I hear the beginning notes, my heart journeys back to the ‘70s when Bruce and I joined with the elders in an out-of-the-way facility in committing ourselves to the presupposition that every voice has wisdom and passion to bring to tomorrow’s unfolding. In so doing, I recommit myself to seeing that every voice is heard.

F. Nelson Stover

NStover@EmergingEcology.org

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