David Hinkley

STORIES OF SOLIDARITY AND STRUGGLE

A Life in the Worldwide Movement for Human Rights

Activism and Social Movement Studies

Collection Editor
R. ANNA HAYWARD

LIVED PLACES PUBLISHING

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LPP

I dedicate this work to all teachers, particularly to *al-Ustadh* Mahmoud Mohamed Taha of Sudan, Paulo Freire of Brazil, Catherine Walsh of Ireland, Hanan al Hroub of Palestine, and Emma Willard of the United States. Each exemplifies teachers who, in different places and times, set a transformative example of pedagogy that promotes both the transmission of knowledge and its application to the liberation of the individual, with the goal of freedom for every member of what Taha called "the human caravan".

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Abstract

This memoir recollects true stories about the struggle for human rights, informed by the place of struggle lived in by each of the human rights champions you will meet here. While shaped by diverse cultural and political circumstances, threads of commonality link them all, because human rights and the voices defending them are universal. My grandmother and mother, who were teachers, taught me the meaning of solidarity—to stand with others and for principle, and to do what you can to make a difference. My journey starts there, where that consciousness began for me, and travels near and far. Welcome!

Key words

activism, Amnesty International, conscience, executions, Indigenous, movement, prisoners, solidarity, struggle

Contents

Introduction

In these pages, you will meet towering historical figures and ordinary people who share a passionate belief in human rights and the obligation of every human being to preserve, protect, and promote those rights. Because human rights are under continuous threat and attack throughout the world, these individuals decided—perhaps at first in the precincts of the heart—to do something. To act.

Each chapter tells a story of the struggle for human rights and human dignity over the past century, from Cherokee, Iowa to Khartoum, Sudan. What unites these stories is that, in ways large and small, each became a part of my life. I chose these memories from among many I collected on the long journey I have traveled because I believe each one may offer a useful model for activists in this century. I have included reflections on the methods and strategies employed in the campaigns and intercessions mounted by human rights organizations and individual advocates with whom I have collaborated, particularly during my long association with Amnesty International.

Learning objectives

- Assess the relevance of the human rights movement to issues and struggles you have experienced or encountered in your own life or community.
- Design an approach to applying the methods and strategies of human rights activism to struggles in your own life or community.
- Evaluate the changes in the mechanisms of achieving social change arising from twenty-first century advancements in research and communications.
- Investigate avenues of engagement in the human rights movement, identifying those that offer the most promise for application to struggles in your own life or community.
- Identify qualities shared by the human rights champions encountered here and qualities that distinguish them; consider which qualities and examples you personally find most inspiring or illuminating.

1
Mother in black and white: Inheritance and inspiration

> Where, after all, do human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world ... Such are the places where every man, woman and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere.
>
> — Eleanor Roosevelt, speech to the United Nations (quoted in *The New York Times*, March 28, 1958)

1925: Masked and unmasked

My mother was 13 when she, her younger brothers Philip and Billy, and Grandma Bowen walked from the old frontier Victorian on Walnut Street in Cherokee, Iowa, about a quarter mile down the hill to town. I suppose little Franny, three, was being looked after by one of the Shea aunts. Otherwise she was there too, probably being carried by Philip.

It was cold in late November 1925, but there was no snow yet. *The Phantom of the Opera* was showing at the Cherokee Opera House. After watching the Phantom creep up on poor Christine for 101 nerve-wracking minutes on a 20-foot-high screen, they trudged back up the hill by moonlight. I don't think Mother normally held Grandma's hand while they walked together, but that night she did.

Halfway home they saw a glow up ahead. They hurried to see, thinking somebody's house had caught fire. What they found was a mob in sheets and pointed hoods with eyeholes, some waving torches around, burning a cross on the front lawn of a Jewish physician and his family. Mother told me the doctor's name but I've forgotten it. There were no black people in Cherokee then, as far as I know, but the Klan had found somebody to hate.

Fresh from having their blood frozen by the Phantom's unmasking on the silver screen, here was a horror in three dimensions. Mother remembered being more appalled than terrified. Grandma Bowen, who took care of the children of a prominent local politician, suddenly recognized his wing tips under his robe. Still holding Mother's hand and with her boys in tow, she set her jaw, walked up to the Klansman, and said, "I love your kids, but don't ever bring them to me again."

1938: Get in the pool

Mother taught Physical Education at a combined elementary and high school in Elmhurst, a Chicago suburb, in 1938. Dad drove up from Eagle Grove, Iowa, often during the summer while she was getting situated and after that on some weekends. He bought

her gifts, and they'd go dancing to big band music at one of the starlit ballrooms, drive the lakeshore and around town in his Ford, or, if Dad was lucky, in Grandpa's shiny black Buick Roadmaster. They'd have dinner and strudel at The Berghoff, an already old German restaurant in the Loop that Dad loved, having heard lore about it all his life. It was Grandpa Hinkley's favorite place for empire building, and the portions were legendary.

Fascism had been on the rise in Europe for 15 years. Hitler's invasion of Poland was only a year away. In America, Jim Crow laws were prevalent. By the time Mother moved there, Chicago had been enforcing racial segregation in public housing for a decade and would for years to come, long after the war began, Dad got drafted, and Mother returned to Iowa to teach in Fort Madison.

"Colored" water cooler in streetcar terminal, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

Photo credit: Russell Lee, July 7, 1939; public domain.

But at Elmhurst K-12, light was about to dawn. In early September, it was still warm enough to teach swimming for P.E. On the first day at the school pool, Mother found that all the black children just stood around while the white kids dove in, not waiting for Miss Bowen's instructions. She asked the black kids what they were waiting for. They pointed to the white kids. "Get in the pool," she said.

Four little words. Dozens of little faces instantly filled with doubt, confusion, and apprehension. But then, one tiny girl jumped in. Her friends, one by one, followed. In a moment Mother kept forever like a pressed flower in her memory, they were suddenly all in the water, splashing around. Cool water, pale blue like the sky. All of a sudden, something new. Everybody together. Sure, on the lakeshore, everybody was in the same water, but not on the same stretch of beach. And that was Lake Michigan, the size of a state. This was the school pool.

The girl who had led the way kept looking up at Mother. The afternoon sun backlit Mother's dark curls, ringing her pretty Irene Dunne-lookalike face. "You have a halo," the little girl said. A few white kids stared and pointed at the newcomers, whispered to each other, then swam to poolside, clambered onto the deck, and stood glaring at Mother, incredulous. "Get in the pool," Mother said. They did a double-take, trying to stare her down. When that didn't work, one shrugged and jumped back in. The others followed suit. They were different now than they would have been. Different for life. Maybe they even knew it.

Predictably, not long after, Mother was called into the principal's office. She was told the school had to be sensitive to the feelings and preferences of the parents. "Which ones?" she said.

The principal went beet red. "Why, for my part, of course I have no objection! But complaints have been lodged. You understand, don't you, Miss Bowen?"

"Hmm. Well, we're not going back to the old way now," Mother announced.

"No?" the principal said, sitting up straight, trying to stare her down.

"No," she said. "Imagine what the newspapers would think of that."

Mother at Elmhurst K-12 in 1938.

1961: You'd better

In 1961, I was a freshman in high school. Dinner was on the kitchen table. Dianne and Cathy were halfway finished. I was late. Mother's philosophy didn't have to be written down. It was in her eyes. You can sit down when you're ready to eat, but if your food is cold, too bad. Don't leave any on your plate. Over lukewarm pot roast and whole-kernel corn, I related a story I had just seen on the six o'clock news about a café in Oakland that "allegedly" turned away customers who were black. A sit-in had led to arrests. A protester was televised being dragged away, head bloody.

Mother listened, her face introspective and solemn. Dianne said Oakland was a crummy town and ought to be relocated to Mississippi or Alabama. Cathy thought she meant it literally and looked wounded for "Oaktown," a place we all liked, Cathy the animal lover most of all, because of Fairyland and the petting zoo. "Wasn't it just the one café?" she said. Dianne rolled her eyes. Cathy got it, laughed at herself, and put on her classic *omathon* (Irish for befuddled) face. "Oh. I thought that was a little drastic."

"They showed it all on the news," I said. "All the cops were white. If you ask me they put the wrong people in jail."

"Big surprise," Dianne said, leaving the table. Cathy followed, too late as usual. Whoever got to the den first got to choose what to watch on television. "First in!" was the cry of triumph, an absolute law at 3325 Cowper Street in Palo Alto. Mother cleared the table and then sat down while I finished my dinner. She poured me another glass of milk, and then in a faraway voice told me about the Phantom and the KKK in Cherokee, and about Jim Crow and

the swimming pool in Elmhurst. I was always proud of Mother, unashamedly idolizing her all through my boyhood. Never more than right then, in the kitchen of our house, as the 1950s died and the 1960s struggled to be born. Mother finished her story and got started on the dishes. An *I Love Lucy* rerun, part of a marathon, could be heard down the hall, the plaintive echo of a show already long gone. Lucy and Ethel, Ricky and Fred on our black-and-white Sylvania, frequently punctuated by Dianne's giggle and Cathy's gigantic laugh. Mother stood at the sink with her back to me, rinsing and slipping the plates into the dishwasher. From then on, Mother's memories would be partly mine. I think she intended that. She was almost 50, Grandma Bowen had just died and those kids she taught P.E. in the 1930s now had kids of their own, going to school somewhere in America. "I want to do something, too, Mom," I said to her back.

"You'd better," she said without turning around.

2
Highlander: Music and struggle in the American South

> And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit.
>
> —Psalm 1:3 and the inscription on Paul Tillich's gravestone
>
> Which side are you on?
>
> —Song title by labor rights activist Florence Reece, 1931

Death penalty abolitionists gather at Highlander

In 1979, when Larry Cox, Mike Jendrzejczyk, and I arrived at the Highlander Center in New Market, Tennessee, for a gathering of death penalty abolitionists, I knew almost nothing about the place or its storied history. But I liked the company I was in, the beauty of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and was looking forward to meeting kindred spirits from all over the South.

Most of the attendees were prison ministers from Tennessee, Georgia, Florida, and other Southern states, gearing up for impending executions. They knew the condemned as other pastors know members of their congregation who have confided their most shameful secrets in hopes of redemption.

Laughter and joking filled the main room when we got there, but looking at each face, I suddenly felt sad. Such good souls, yet etched into each face was the burden of knowing—knowing the terrible crimes of which the men and women they ministered to had been convicted, witnessing the wretched conditions and inhuman treatment endured on death row and knowing the grief and heartache of stricken families, both of the murder victims and the condemned.

A storm in the mountains

Discussions were stirring but without many glimmers of hope. So, I was glad on the second day when Tony Dunbar piled Larry, Mike, me, and an inflatable raft into his van and drove us to a nearby lake he knew. A brisk wind blew us quickly out to the center of the lake. Rain clouds formed up in minutes, heavy drops plummeted down, drenching us, and the Smoky Mountains suddenly boomed and rumbled. Oh yeah—mountain weather. Oops. The four of us tried paddling with all our strength, but the little raft was so overloaded that it made no headway in the stiffening wind. Lightning bolts kept striking the rod near the shoreline.

"Are we in trouble?" Mike yelled.

Tony laughed, nodding heartily. "Somebody's gotta get out and kick!" So there I was, in the middle of the lake, pushing the raft

along, trying to avoid the churning paddles, glimpsing strikes on the lightning rod out of one watery eye, feeling the tingle and waiting for the big one that would turn me into a 200-pound roast puffer fish. I made eye contact with Larry's astonished face. He shook his head and laughed, and I laughed too, but underwater.

All the way back to Highlander in the van, the four of us took turns breaking out in laughter.

"Excellent idea, Tony," Larry mentioned.

"Wasn't it?" he grinned. "Shall we come back tomorrow?"

Walking in the footprints of history

On the final day of the conference, a private session was held, from which I was thoughtfully disinvited. A small group was planning civil disobedience. Today, Amnesty International policy approves of civil disobedience under its banner in specified circumstances and constraints and has published an online Civil Disobedience Toolkit, but in those years, Amnesty International prohibited its leaders and members from committing civil disobedience in Amnesty's name. As chairperson of Amnesty International USA's board of directors, I needed to be excluded from this discussion to protect Amnesty from any future charges of conspiracy. So I had time on my hands. I spent it roaming the grounds and talking to people who worked there about Highlander's history.

Maybe you know the feeling you sometimes get when you are walking in the footprints of history. I felt it at Highlander that day.

The events that distinguished its role in the labor movement and civil rights history occurred before the center was forced to move to its current location in New Market from its original site in Monteagle, Tennessee, but the footprints were there, pressed deeper into the path by the fidelity to the cause of all who carried it on.

In 2019, a white supremacist terrorist burned down much of the Highlander Center's HQ in Knoxville, a story that flickered on the news and was forgotten. I felt ashamed anew at how ignorant I was when I roamed those grounds myself. I had heard about the red-baiting that led to its shutdown by the State of Tennessee in 1961, and that Dr King, Rosa Parks, Pete Seeger, and others who gathered here had been hounded by J. Edgar Hoover's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in a futile effort to discredit them.

The first steps by its founders, of course, were taken in the marches of those who had gone before them. Their common spirit of solidarity with the oppressed and their belief in freedom led Myles Horton, Don West, and Jim Dombrowski, white Southern progressives, to found Highlander as a Folk School in 1932.

And the footprints lead farther back still, to Union Theological Seminary in Morningside Heights, New York City, where the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Paul Tillich had inspired Horton and Dombrowski. But the trail had really begun a century before in Denmark with Nikolai Frederik Severin Grundtvig, who created the movement for Danish Folk Schools. These schools set aside Latin and Greek and engaged students in learning about the world, the time, and the challenges all around

them. Grundtvig convinced the Danish establishment democracy would be impossible without education that celebrates homegrown culture and involves young people in the life of the nation. "A tree planted by the rivers of water."

Preparing to teach junior high at St John Vianney School in East San Jose in 1972, I had studied Danish Folk Schools and tried applying similar principles within a Catholic K-8 double school, mostly without success. Irate parents demanded a return to textbook teaching. The principal caved. But I never forgot the excitement of my students when it was working. One usually jaded eighth-grader told me after an hour in a circle talking about differences each had experienced between law and justice, "First time I haven't once asked myself, why do I have to learn this?"

Music and community in the midst of struggle

Highlander's green lanes might have been quiet that evening, but for crickets and cicadas and a crackle in the air left over from the storm. I decided to go to my room and read, but magic stepped in. A guy who had come along as a second driver for one of the prison ministers stopped me. "You know the couple, the managing directors here?" he asked me.

"I met them."

"Did you know they're both bluegrass musicians?"

"No. You know them?" I wondered.

"No, I just heard it. I asked the husband if he'd play for the group. He said he was exhausted but maybe would ask her."

"Wow. That'd be great."

"Yeah, but he went home, and I think that's that."

"Maybe it's worth asking again," I suggested.

So, we walked the path through a pitch-dark stretch of woods to the directors' house. Dogs howled, and that was friendly compared to the expression on the tired director's face. His wife and co-director came out looking just as weary and skeptical but they came around instantly when we told them who they would be playing for. They knew the tireless effort prison ministers give day and night without fanfare or hope of earthly reward.

An hour later, the impromptu concert was well underway. Care and worries fell away in a merry parade of fiddle, banjo, dulcimer, autoharp, guitar, and washboard. In a mountain twang, the husband and wife sang old-timey tunes and folk ballads and played reels and railroad songs I had only heard on my grandma's radio as a child in Iowa. Weary legs rose and danced. Weary faces broke out in smiles. The music swelled, smiles turned to laughter. I so wished my wife Tina could be there, knowing she would be in heaven to the last note. The Almanac Singers' 1941 classic "Which Side Are You On" brought the house down. I thought of Pete Seeger, if he knew, smiling at this spontaneous, indelible moment. Likewise, Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, Ramblin' Jack, and Cisco Houston, their souls still out there haunting the back roads and switching yards, singing the American story in the language of the people.

Joan Baez at the 1963 March on Washington.

Photo credit: USIA photographer; public domain.

In the music that rang on into the night, I heard, I think all of us heard, echoes of the music of revolt ringing through the decades, through the centuries, fanning the always-flickering flame of human freedom. I thought of Joan Baez, who, in 1973, had recruited me in the global fight for human rights and embodied for me the spirit of protest in song. I thought, too, of Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta and Bobby Kennedy. When did the United Farm Workers ever organize, march in protest, boycott and picket without music? It was while marching with them I learned most about music and struggle. I thought of Emma Goldman's immortal words: "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution." Larry, Mike, and Tony came over to thank me for my part in bringing out the bluegrass. One quoted Friedrich Nietzsche, "Without music, life would be a mistake."

Looking back, moving forward

All these years later, every state in the South but Virginia still carries out executions. All the men and women who came to Highlander to prepare for a wave of state-sponsored killings have since then watched those in their spiritual care die, mostly of old age or suicide, on death rows throughout the region. Some, even after abolitionists' valiant and relentless efforts to turn away revenge disguised as justice, were electrocuted or poisoned by lethal injection. All of us watched as a global campaign to save Troy Davis, who had compelling evidence of his innocence, failed to prevent his shameful and tragic execution by the state of Georgia in 2011.

Along the way, many in our number have retired, some have passed away, including Mike Jendrzejczyk, our little brother. On the long drive back to New York in Rose Styron's borrowed Jeep wagon, hardly anything was said. We were going home, going back to work, with footprints of our own to leave as a trail for those who would follow.

Because, as everyone who takes up the cause of human rights and social justice learns, the path of struggle can only be taken by following in the footsteps of those who labored, struggled, most often failed, but persevered before you. Their work and worry must have seemed in vain more often than not. But they were bringing it to us, as we carried it to those who today lift new voices, from Ferguson, Missouri, to Khartoum, Sudan. Voices that will not be silenced, who will continue to fight for a better world, and to sing and dance to their own brave music.

3
Starke: The fight to stop an execution in Florida

> Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone.
>
> —John 8:7
>
> The struggle for justice doesn't end with me. This struggle is for all the Troy Davises who came before me and all the ones who will come after.
>
> —Troy Davis, quoted in Jealous, B. 'California Voters Should Remember Troy Davis This November', Huffington Post, September 20, 2016

An impending execution in Florida

In my long life, I have seen the best and the worst of my country. Sometimes, like one week in Florida in 1979, I found both in the same place at the same time.

It was my first visit to the state. It was springtime—hot and humid but with breezy mornings and evenings. Tallahassee is a pretty place for a government town, though I didn't get to see much of it. Within an hour of driving in from the airport, I was called

to speak outside the governor's mansion. Amnesty International USA had sent me to help the legal defense team stop the impending executions of John Spenkelink and Willie Darden at Raiford State Prison in Starke, Florida. Larry Cox was there too, joining activists and prison ministers who were committing civil disobedience at the gates of the mansion.

John Spenkelink's mother, Lois, had come from California to plead for her son's life. She was suffering in the afternoon heat. Larry and others held signs over her to provide a little shade. She spoke with great difficulty to reporters, breathing heavily and fighting tears.

Foreground: Larry Cox, left, and me on the right at the protest outside the Florida Governor's Mansion before civil disobedience began, May 1979.

Photographer unknown; photo owned by me.

Scharlette Holdman was in charge. As the founder and director of the Florida Clearinghouse on Criminal Justice, she was