Readings and Report from Selma, Alabama

I begin this morning with an introduction to one of those influenced by Ella Baker.

“Diane Judith Nash (born May 15, 1938) was a leader and strategist of the student wing of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Historian David Halberstam described her as '…bright, focused, utterly fearless, with an unerring instinct for the correct tactical move at each increment of the crisis; as a leader, her instincts had been flawless, and she was the kind of person who pushed those around her to be at their best, or be gone from the movement.'

“Nash’s campaigns were among the most successful of the era. Her efforts included the first successful civil rights campaign to integrate lunch counters (Nashville); the Freedom Riders, who de-segregated interstate travel; co-founding the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); and co-initiating the Alabama Voting Rights Project and working on the Selma Voting Rights Movement…” [Wikipedia]

Last Sunday, March 8, I joined the 50th anniversary commemorative march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma. To be there was chilling (recalling the violence leading up to, at, and after the Bloody Sunday demonstration). It was also humbling, and inspiring – a bit surreal and transcendent – and it was joyous, with tens of thousands of others, with ten from our church family.

And we know voting rights are being been suppressed and the work still continues.

The day before this public march, President Obama spoke from Selma at the foot of the bridge and walked across it with his family and dignitaries, including Representative John Lewis, who had his skull fractured there 50 years ago.

Diane Nash, so instrumental in organizing the original protest, decided not to march, although present. She said,

“I was all set to march with them. They had me on the front line. And then George Bush came out and got in the march, and I left. I decided I wasn’t marching anywhere with George Bush. The Selma movement stands for nonviolence and peace and democracy and fairness and voting
rights, and George Bush stands for just the opposite. He stands for violence and war and stolen elections and for goodness sake, his administration had people tortured. I think this occasion was not appropriate for him to be at. I think for him to appear to be leading people involved in the nonviolent movement in this country, for photographs of that to go across the world, would make it look as though we have sold out. I think that is an insult to people whose lives were taken... it's an insult to me. And I think it's an insult to everybody who does believe in nonviolence."

I am an admirer of Diane Nash, and her conclusion is unmitigated by President Bush having signed the extension of Voting Rights Act in 2006. Yet, it occurs to me that his presence was at least a reminder of bipartisan possibilities, and I remain a “prisoner of hope” that Congress will act to protect voting rights if we work for it.

Each of us makes our choices, and just another word about Diane Nash.

Following the burning of one of the buses carrying Freedom Riders and beatings of those on board in Anniston, Birmingham and Montgomery, Diane Nash refused to see that effort stopped and recruited replacements for those injured. She declared, "It was clear to me that if we allowed the Freedom Ride to stop at that point, just after so much violence had been inflicted, the message would have been sent that all you have to do to stop a nonviolent campaign is inflict massive violence,"... "Nash then took over responsibility and led the Freedom Rides from Birmingham, Alabama to Jackson, Mississippi." (Wikipedia)

Final brief words from Ella Baker (1903-1986):

“May God grant … [us] good health and increased courage to continue the fight for human justice and freedom for all [hu]mankind.”

“I believe that the struggle is eternal. Somebody else carries on.”

“ELL A BAKER – ‘WE WHO BELIEVE IN FREEDOM’”
Rev. Bruce Southworth

“Until the killing of Black mothers’ sons becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of White mothers’ sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest.”

Ella Baker – organizer, activist, radical – a commanding five feet, two inches tall – spoke those words in August of 1964. She was speaking at the state convention of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party as it prepared for the national Democratic Convention. (Joanne Grant, Ella Baker: Freedom Bound, 163)
Earlier in the summer in June, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner had been murdered. They were young civil rights workers who were investigating the burning of a church that had been the site of a meeting about voter registration.

When the three disappeared, the outcry across the country within the Civil Rights movement led to a massive search including dragging the rivers within Mississippi. That search did not lead to the discovery of the three, but it did turn up bodies of black men “that no one had ever looked for.” (B. J. Reagon)

James Chaney was black and a Mississippi native. Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner were white and New Yorkers. There was intense media coverage. A TV reporter asked Ella Baker about the deaths, and she observed, “The unfortunate thing is that it took this… to make the rest of the country turn its eyes on the fact that there were other [black] bodies lying under the swamps of Mississippi.” (Ella Baker, Shyrlee Dallard, Silver Burdett Press, N. J., 1990, 104)

Bernice Johnson Reagon of Sweet Honey in the Rock wrote her tribute “Ella’s Song” in 1980, and for the refrain she drew upon Ella Baker’s words about these events: “Until the killing of Black mothers’ sons becomes as important to the rest of the country as the killing of White mothers’ sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest.”

[The bodies were finally discovered near Philadelphia, Mississippi buried in an earthen dam. They had been shot to death. In December 1964, Sheriff Lawrence Rainey, Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price and seventeen others were arrested on conspiracy charges, and eight were ultimately convicted.]

“We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes,” and I turn this morning to Ella Baker, her life, her witness, her words, and her deeds as one who exemplifies the glory of creation: a human being fully alive! She was one of the extraordinary activists for civil rights in the 20th century, unconcerned about public recognition, devoted to empowering others, and filled with a powerful faith that each person’s gifts can bless and heal and transform.

She was either one of the leaders, or one of the founders and instigators of four of the most significant civil rights organizations of the 20th century, as well as a local NY activist along the way.

This morning’s sermon is another in the occasional series of theology and spiritual growth through biography. Ella Baker’s spirit was at times cantankerous to those of more establishment, or sexist, or racist ways, but more than that she was a witness to the divine spark come aflame.
Were this an exercise in hero-worship, she would scold. Her vision was of collective, shared leadership, not of powerful personas. So this morning it is her teachings and wisdom that I want to celebrate and share. In using her gifts, she witnessed to Life, just as greater Life awaits us whenever we use our gifts.

Ella Baker, born in Norfolk, Virginia, on December 13, 1903, grew up in Littleton, North Carolina. As a child and as an adult, she was feisty, independent-minded, and deeply principled.

Her grandparents had been slaves, and family lore told of her grandmother’s independent spirit. Her grandmother had simply refused to marry the man chosen for her by her owner, and for that she was expelled from the house to the fields to do her work each day. The family celebrated this boldness and other acts of defiance by their forebears, so it was no particular surprise to learn that at age seven or eight, Ella slapped a white boy who used racial epithets toward her. A year or so later, she also pelted the son of the Mayor with stones for the same kind of name-calling. Reflecting upon that, Ella Baker observed, “If you have an aggressive nature, you respond to the circumstances that provide opportunity for this aggressive nature to express itself.” (Grant, 16)

Acknowledging an angry temperament, she sought to channel it rather than let it eat away at her (and that happens, doesn’t it, when anger defines our lives?), and it contributed to her life’s work for justice and social change.

Independent-minded: She once voted against her boyfriend for a student government position telling her beau quite candidly that he was not the most qualified among the candidates!

After a ten-year courtship, she married Bob (T. J.) Robinson in 1940, but she kept her own name, rather unusual in the 1940s.

This independent streak would lead her to clash with some of her bosses, including Walter White, the Executive Director of the NAACP, where she first worked as an organizer in the South.

Later, in the late 1950s, the all-male ministers who led the Southern Christian Leadership Conference never quite figured out how to embrace fully a colleague who was female, and not only a woman, but also a layperson, not a minister. An outspoken, woman, non-minister with immense talent and organizational skill, stretched their solicitude, even as she served as their Executive Director.

And I should add that, in terms of her upbringing, her character, and her convictions, she came from a family with an ethic of sharing. If someone was in need, her parents helped, and the children helped.
If you can do something, then you do whatever it is that you can. A simple, powerful ethic of respect for others and of service informed her life.

Even if we have not been blessed with that in our own growing up – the simple ethic of helping others, it can still become a personal, liberating, healing spiritual discipline… if you make the choice, as so many discover and do.

So what does a college-educated, young black woman, valedictorian at Shaw University, raised on a farm in rural North Carolina, do upon graduation, when too poor to continue in school to become a medical missionary or a social worker? The expectation was that she would teach school nearby home, and in typical Ella Baker fashion, she chose her own path. At age 23, she came to New York and delighted in the offerings and vitality of the Harlem Renaissance, which she found in full bloom in 1927.

Ella Baker found various jobs as a waitress, a domestic worker, and a factory worker, and then as a writer for Harlem newspapers such as the American West Indian News. She also worked with George Schuyler who in many ways pioneered the consumer co-op movement.

And she participated in anti-lynching campaigns, labor issues, and projects with A. Philip Randolph.

In 1941, she joined the staff of the NAACP as an assistant field secretary for local branches. She was on the road about half the year, and her correspondence reveals that with great regularity she lost her hats along the way. Yet, she was able to have the railroad locate and return them about 90% of the time.

More significantly, she visited local branches, especially the South, where she was well received for her genuine concern and interest in local issues and for her outreach beyond blacks in the professional class. She inspired the local branches to grow.

In 1943, she became the director of branches for the NAACP and organized a membership campaign that had dramatic results, nearly doubling membership in a short time.

By 1946, she had taken over the upbringing of one of her nieces and did not feel she could travel as she had. And truth be told, the hierarchy of the NAACP and many of its organizational practices frustrated her, and she resigned her position.

However, she remained active in numerous volunteer causes and work, things like tenant organizing and tenants’ rights, and supporting Bayard Rustin, the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and the first Freedom Rides, the Journey of Reconciliation, in 1947.
Ella Baker became head of the NYC branch of the NAACP and was active in the school desegregation efforts of the 1950s, advocating open enrollment policies. At least by the 1950s if not earlier, Ella Baker was also participating in some of the coalitions and groups meeting here with us at Community.

Following the success of the Montgomery bus boycotts, she was part of the core group in New York that also included Bayard Rustin that helped King, Abernathy, Lowery, and Shuttlesworth organize the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957. It was designed to be a southern-based vehicle for mass mobilization and organizing with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s leadership and that of Ralph Abernathy and others.

She moved to Montgomery in 1958 to organize much of the work around voter registration and local efforts such as the literacy campaign.

She stayed with the SCLC for two years, and then guided the students who created the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, following the massive lunch-counter sit-ins that began in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960. Here, in this role of counselor, guide, mentor and teacher, she listened, asked timely questions, and with complete faith in the young adult leaders helped them organize and take charge of their own movement, rather than be taken over by either the NAACP or the SCLC. Julian Bond reports that he is among those whom she challenged and blessed.

The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee known as SNCC went through many organizational structures and restructurings as it evolved, with Baker playing various roles while working for other change organizations, such as the Southern Conference Educational Fund, also based in Atlanta.

For a moment, I want to return to Diane Nash, one of those student co-founders of SNCC, and to her role with the Freedom Riders, who were attacked and beaten on their buses in Anniston, Birmingham, and Montgomery, Alabama.

In 1961, the rides had been conceived by the Congress of Racial Equality, but after [these] severe attacks, CORE’s leader James L. Farmer, Jr. was hesitant to continue them. Nash talked with the students comprising the Nashville Student Movement and argued that, "We can’t let them stop us with violence. If we do, the movement is dead." Nash was … a student at Fisk University, about to appear in the public eye as both a leader, and a very powerful woman. [In speaking with a Justice Department official, who sought to discourage her, warning of violence and possible death], she simply responded, "We know someone will be killed, but we cannot let violence overcome nonviolence." Nash explained … that the students and she had already signed their last will and testament. [Wikipedia]
Returning to Ella Baker, biographer Joanne Grant made a documentary film about Baker and titled it *Fundi*, a Swahili word, “which denotes the person in a community who passes on the wisdom of the elders, the crafts, the knowledge.” (143) She was trusted completely.

The violence of the times in the South was horrific, as the resistance to the civil rights movement took its ugly course of murder, shootings, bombings, arrests, and reprisals against those who challenged segregation. Baker’s emphasis with SNCC on local initiatives contributed directly to political reform in Mississippi through the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Although she moved back to New York City in 1965 a few months after Selma’s Bloody Sunday, she continued to work with the Movement, especially SNCC. Her constant theme in social change was populist grassroots organizing and empowering new leaders, local leaders. Wherever she went, she helped those whom she collaborated with to understand “what their potentials are, what their strengths are.” (192)

She continued her activism with various causes including resistance to the Vietnam War. In 1968, she warned about the threats to civil liberties at home when government goes to war abroad.

That year, she also helped to lead 5000 women to protest the Vietnam War on the steps of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C. When barred from those steps, she along with those like Ron Dellums and Representative Bella Abzug sued the chief of police for preventing their assembly, a case they won at the Supreme Court.

During the 1970s, Ella Baker began to receive some of the recognition so richly deserved for her leadership role with the NAACP, as a co-founder of both the SCLC and SNCC, and mentor to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, as well as her other causes and groups. With dementia beginning to take its toll, she limited her travels as she approached 80. She died on her birthday, December 13, 1986 at age 83.

She was a soul on fire. She lit fires of love, courage, and justice in others. She always reminded her listeners, “People have to be made to understand that they cannot look for salvation anywhere but to themselves... Every time I see a young person who identifies with the struggle. I take new hope. I feel a new life as a result of it.”

She preferred to work behind the scenes: to organize, to listen, to ask questions, to trust young people.

It is a remarkable spiritual presence to set one’s own ego needs aside; to promote others so that they truly could say we did this ourselves with your encouragement and support and challenge.
She recognized each person has different experiences, skills, and gifts, and she sought to draw those out. Nor, should anyone emulate her, for she would call us to find our own gifts, calling, and share it.

In writing about the work of the NAACP in 1943, she knew, as did others, that its work was about not only saving “black America’s body”, but also saving “white America’s soul.” (67) And certainly today, white/pink/privileged Americans, especially white/pink/privileged American males continue to struggle to grow their souls and transform those institutions that favor them and oppress others.

Ella Baker really, truly, honestly did not want to follow the expectations upon her to teach school, yet she gave honor to the teaching profession in all she did.

She was also a woman of faith – in youth, in self-growth and development, and in justice as a worthy pursuit of her time on earth.

A life such as hers, for me, lifts up some questions – as she might hope:

- Are there lessons to draw on from your family – your upbringing that give you power and strength? Stories of courage, or an ethic of sharing or?
- Do you know your own capacity for violent anger, and are you finding ways to capture it and use it more creatively?
- What gifts do you offer to others just as she developed hers – the listening, the questioning, and the walking alongside?
- If you are one of those people who loses your hats, do you give up or try to get them back?
- How do you respond to obstacles and claim your power?
- Do you have a faith in something bigger than yourself that makes you bigger and gives you hope and courage?

A woman of faith, feisty, restless, truthful, she was praised in 1980 by William Strickland at a gathering in Jackson, Mississippi when he introduced Ella Baker as “a national monument, an awesome danger, a profound threat, a shining black beacon.” (223)

In closing, her words:
“I was never working for an organization; I have always tried to work for a cause. And the cause to me is bigger than any organization, bigger than any group of people. It is the cause of humanity… The drive of the human spirit for freedom….” (224-5)

Ella Baker once declared, “I believe that the struggle is eternal. Somebody else carries on.” (Dallard, 122)

And who shall that be?

“We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes.”