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LIFE QUESTIONS: MEMORIES OF WOMEN CIVIL RIGHTS LEADERS

by
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On the cover of the program brochure for the Public Forum "Louisiana Women in the Civil Rights Era: From Memory to Education" are photographs of two very different and important community activists in the New Orleans struggle for black freedom. On the right is Mrs. Oretha Castle Haley, the determined African American leader of the New Orleans chapter of the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) and a veteran of many local direct-action demonstrations in the city. Mrs. Haley continued her political efforts after the peak movement years by becoming involved in local politics, and in early childhood education. On the left side of the brochure is a photograph of Mrs. Rosa Freeman Keller, an heiress of the local Coca-Cola fortune and an Urban League stalwart in the 1950s, years when leadership in a bi-racial organization could be dangerous and personally traumatic. Mrs. Keller used her considerable influence, charm, and political capital to push for library desegregation in New Orleans in the 1950s, to campaign to keep public schools open during the 1960-61 school crisis, and to promote African American voting rights and political participation. She also funded the lawsuit that resulted in the integration of Tulane University.

I had the privilege of interviewing both women between 1978 and 1988 when I worked on a Ph.D. dissertation which later became a book on New Orleans' civil rights leadership. Although I was able to interview Mrs. Haley only once, I was able to spend a number of hours with Mrs. Keller during several interviews between 1978 and 1988. At the time of my interviews, Mrs. Haley was a large, commanding presence, and the force of her personality permeated her interview narrative. Mrs. Keller, although thin and slow-moving due to several strokes, possessed a keen and analytical mind, great warmth, and a melodic, gracious voice that seemed to soften the gravity of her most difficult experiences.

In 1989, I also interviewed Doris Jean Castle-Scott, Oretha Castle Haley's younger sister and a veteran of local demonstrations, the Freedom Rides of 1961, and other community actions. She had entered the local CORE chapter because she was "following my big sister." At the time of our interview, Castle-Scott was a slender, intense woman, who, in 1989, still very much mourned the recent deaths of her sister Oretha and her brother-in-law Richard Haley. She spoke of her sister's strength and vulnerability, and of her great hope that the lives of ordinary African Americans would be much improved by political change.

These three very different women shared with me their memories of childhood and

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youth, their awareness and feelings about racial segregation and oppression, and their own experiences in trying to change the political and social system of New Orleans and the United States. They voiced their sense of pride in what they saw as real achievements, and their disappointment about changes that appeared only slowly and inadequately. While their stories were infused with the hopes that had guided their activism, all three voiced disappointment that the movement years seemed to have been replaced by the Age of Reagan and George Bush the First.

In the years since I interviewed New Orleans' civil rights leadership, I have had the privilege of talking with many other African American community leaders in four counties in the Mississippi Delta. These experiences have made me aware of the complexities of personal moral development and social movement leadership among women who were also wives, mothers, schoolteachers, businesswomen, farmers, and Head Start workers in their most politically active years. The complexities of these women leaders' experiences and their perceptions of major social change are topics I would like to examine.

At the Public Forum we were in the presence of women who experienced the injustices of the age of segregation in Louisiana. And we had the opportunity to hear their stories about how they worked to change the situation of African Americans in the state and nation. It was a privilege to be in the presence of so many women leaders who have so much to teach us. Their stories relate each woman's experience, her reflections on and analysis of that experience, and the wisdom of her years as an individual who has been embedded in community life.

It is important that these women are more than 50 years of age. Psychologists and researchers of memory tell us that we begin to reflect more thoroughly on our lives, and on the history we have lived, after we reach that half-century mark. It is in mid- and late-life that we seek to see the meaning in the patterns of our actions and in the struggles of those around us. In these years, Erik Erikson suggested, we focus more on generational issues rather than personal ambition and achievement; we become concerned with what we can pass on to future generations, and on what we can give back to our communities. At 50, we have lived long enough to accept certain experiences as defeats, and others as victories; we have also lived long enough to see that those two kinds of experiences are in fact connected, and that each could not exist without the other. We can see our experiences as a continuum in which life has presented us with contradictions and challenges, and has allowed us to learn (or to refuse to learn) from the difficult lessons of failure and great fortune.

If we ask questions thoughtfully, and listen carefully, we can learn a great deal from the women leaders among us. We can learn about the texture of life in segregated communities, and about the ways in which that life has and has not changed since the Civil Rights Movement. We can also learn about the experience of activism for each woman, whether that participation included sitting-in at a dime store lunch counter, organizing a local voter-registration drive, or becoming a plaintiff in a lawsuit that granted African American public school teachers salaries that equaled those of their white counterparts. We can learn how it felt to be one of the first African American children in an all-white New Orleans public school in 1960–1961, or how it felt to desegregate Tulane University. We can also learn about church-based activism from women who variously tried to change the practices of their religious organizations. We need, however, to ask appropriate questions.
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When I thought about what I might discuss at this forum, I wondered what might be of some use to the activists, the audience, and the interviewers who will talk to the Louisiana leaders in the future. It seemed very important for future generations of students and researchers to understand the realities of local communities and lives, and of the ways in which individuals and groups tried to change them. Too often, our present generation of young people seems to understand social change in terms of films and video, of Denzel Washington as Malcolm X, of Mel Gibson as the hero of some war. Often, young people seem to imagine history as a big-screen movie with a requisite number of explosions, a spectacle of unrelenting stimulation via the twin templates of sexuality and violence.

I think that it is important to return the experience of "life" and "change" to the family, the individual, and the local community. For it's here, in particular places and neighborhoods and families in Louisiana, that we need to learn what the civil rights era did to change the lives of African Americans and European Americans. And we need to listen to the voices of those who made the changes so that we can learn how to change our own lives and communities.

So what do we need to ask?

FAMILY

What did the families of the activists tell them about segregation, race, and selfhood? What kinds of people were the heroes of family stories? Who were the villains? We know that family stories and projections are an important part of intergenerational transmission of values, codes of conduct, and aspirations. And who hasn't heard some version of a warning like: "If you keep spending your money all at once when you get it, you'll turn out like your uncle John, who has nothing! See what happens if you don't learn to save!" Or, "Lila is so smart, she'll be just like my sister Florence, and become a doctor." These admonitions are typically road maps to a future either sought or rejected by the family. So what did the activists' families tell them about leadership, taking risks, justice and injustice, values and aspirations, white people and black people, good folk and bad? And what did the activists take from these stories? Whom did they look up to in the family? To whom were they close? And whom did they avoid?

In an interview in 1989, New Orleans activist Doris Jean Castle-Scott recalled the example provided by her grandmother who worked as a sharecropper.

Saying things, different things like, "Don't ever bow to anybody when you feel you're right, or you know you're right." Or she would say things like, "I would rather pick with the chickens than be beholden to somebody." Which I didn't understand then was a great way of expressing what her dignity was all about . . . Whatever picking with the chickens meant, I come to realize, had to do with going hungry or doing without before you bow or beg or whatever to anybody.4

How did leaders apply such lessons? Among white activists, early lessons in Christian love, or in Jewish traditions of justice often led sensitive young women to oppose racial discrimination, and to become involved in actions that immersed them in sustained collaboration with African American community leaders.
NEIGHBORHOODS AND COMMUNITIES

We also learn about life from our neighborhoods and communities. We learn about status, about economic discrimination, and about good and virtuous conduct from the people who live around us. With our family members, these people form our notions of ways of being. In the neighborhoods in which the women leaders lived: Who was admired? About whom were children warned, and why? Did our narrators live in communities in which neighbors corrected each other's children so you couldn't get away with anything, no matter whom you played with? How did that feel?

Were there women who raised their own children, as well as other boys and girls who were left without parents, or who had an unstable family life? Who were these women? Were they admired?

Was there a "culture lady" or a "culture man" in the community, who helped to conserve artistic and cultural traditions, and who encouraged young people to develop their own gifts in music, dance, scholarship, cooking, writing or art? Who was this person? What are the narrator's memories of this kind of presence in their community life?

We know from the scholarship of Daniel C. Thompson, John Dollard, Robin D. G. Kelley, and others, and from the fiction of Richard Wright, Alice Walker, and Eudora Welty, that segregated southern black and white communities were both nurturing and repressive places for talented and adventuresome young people. In what way did our narrator's communities nurture their aspirations and hopes? Support their desires and dreams? Celebrate their achievements? Did parents, churches, and communities make sacrifices for the education of children and young people? Were parents and family members proud of their talented sons and daughters? What kind of young people did communities validate?

Pauline Holmes, a retired schoolteacher and nutritionist of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, explained her own pathway to higher education in a 1996 interview. Although Holmes came from a "very, very poor family," her father was "interested in education," and promised that he would send his children to the college that each selected. Holmes early decided that she wanted to go to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, and word spread through the community that "I, Sam Thompson's poor daughter, was going to Tuskegee." A local schoolteacher came to talk with Holmes, reminding her that "your daddy's got all those children out there, and Tuskegee is very high, and if I were you, I would not go to Tuskegee." The man did, however, offer to talk with a friend at Rust College, a private school for African Americans in northern Mississippi, to see if he could help Pauline attend Rust. Pauline Holmes received a working scholarship, and, with a trunkful of stylish clothes sent by two childless cousins, she attended and graduated from Rust College.

While communities supported and encouraged many talented young people, and assisted families in need, some people were avoided and were portrayed as dishonorable models for an unwanted future. What kinds of people were rejected or ostracized by communities and neighborhoods? Why were these people marginalized? What role did social class, religion, and color play in our narrator's neighborhoods? How were children made aware of these distinctions? Did a marginalized individual's status change as they aged, or as the community changed?
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In Canton, Mississippi, for example, C. O. Chinn was known as a gruff club owner and businessman before the Civil Rights Movement emerged in the early 1960s. Through his unstinting support of the local activists of CORE and SNCC and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), Chinn became a legendary movement leader, honored in his old age as a local father of the Canton movement. Clearly, Chinn’s status had been altered by his activism.

SEGREGATION

Who gave the activists their lessons about the realities and meaning of segregation? How was this explained, if it was? To whom did families and friends refer when they talked about “good white people” or “good Negroes,” or “mean white people” or “bad colored people”? What were the reasons for these judgments? About whom were young people warned? Why?

What were they told about the police, or state and local authorities in general? What did young people learn in school about segregation? Was it ever taught? What values were instilled by the teachers? What individuals were held up as role models and heroes? Which as villains?

Sarah Williams and Flossie Miller, two sisters who grew up in a very poor working-class family in Cleveland, Mississippi in the 1930s, recalled “good” white families as those who paid their grandmother fair wages for her work as a cook, or for their later domestic work. They also fondly remembered one white farmer as “the best white man” because he gave leftover meat from his butchered hogs and steers to his African American neighbors. Such good white people stood in direct contrast to those employers who paid the sisters little for their labor, or who economically exploited their mother, who worked in the laundry at a local white college. “Bad white people” included the local police, klansmen, and other whites who opposed any changes in the segregated state. Clearly, the sisters’ experiences with family poverty, early work, and fragmented educational opportunities influenced their own judgments about survival and relationships with white people.

In the state of Mississippi and in much of the South, the United Daughters of the Confederacy had a great influence in promoting a Confederate-friendly version of southern and Civil War history in the years after the 1880s. This romantic saga appealed to ordinary southern whites, and to a number of academic historians, who promoted notions that the Civil War was “The War of Northern Aggression” or “The War Between the States.” Popular historians and white public discourse stressed that the war was fought over the issue of states’ rights, not slavery. Reconstruction and African American voting rights were, of course, represented as twin disasters. And when white southerners acknowledged slavery or the contributions of African Americans at all, their preferred characters were the devoted “Mammy” and the faithful male retainer, both of whom remained to serve “their white folks” after the defeat of the Lost Cause.

When confronted by the monuments, textbooks, and public ceremonies devoted to this Caucasian fantasy, could black teachers teach their students another, and different history, even if secretly and indirectly? Could the women and men teachers relate this Southern history in a subversive way? Or did most feel forced to remain silent? Did teachers also promote a differing view of African American history, heritage, and conduct through their
teaching of values, discipline, and respect? Were these values, and others, instilled in students in the segregated all-black schools, and in the desegregated schools of the 1960s and beyond? How were students taught about history, citizenship, and worthy conduct? Which values and behaviors were condemned?

SAFETY

The safety of black children in embattled, segregated communities was a central concern of parents, family members, and local church and civic leaders. Adults who were aware of their own vulnerability in the face of white violence or aggression often imposed strict rules on their children's conduct around white people. About what were children warned? Within the black community, were children warned about sexual predation by white men who would cruise through African American neighborhoods looking for pretty girls and young women?

Were young women warned about "bad men" in their own communities, such as sexual predators, seducers, bullies, and petty tyrants? Did families "keep their children close to the house" to protect them from these familiar dangers? Were young people aware of domestic violence within their neighborhoods, and about abusive parents? Did communities condemn these behaviors when neighbors knew about them, or did people assume that such violence was just the "business" of those involved and avoid acknowledging or acting to correct it?

Mary Tyler Dotson, born in Sunflower County, Mississippi, grew up partially blind in a large sharecropping family. She recalled that her mother wanted her to marry young so that she could be supported, but Dotson recalled that she didn't want to marry. She knew that her father was good to her mother, "but a man lived up the street from us, he would whoop his wife and children. I said, 'That man ain't treating the people right what's got two good eyes. I know they ain't going to treat me right'."9

While Mrs. Dotson later married happily, a number of other African American women from the Mississippi Delta have described their decisions to leave home early due to physically abusive fathers, and still later decisions to leave abusive or philandering husbands. Clearly, the stresses of poverty, tenant farming, and racial oppression in the rural South and poorly-paid work and economic insecurity in towns and cities meant that many African Americans lived with complex layers of fear—fear of white violence, of economic destitution, and of explosions of rage and frustration within families and communities.10

What were the effects of this "violence of everyday life" within communities and families? What did continuing threats to the economic security, safety, and spirit do to the development of young people? Did these conditions produce anger and a determination to change the system of segregation and oppression? Or did the ugliness of such experiences engender despair and desperate rebellions that ended in self-destructive acts or in violence?11
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COMING OF AGE

What aspirations and desires did young women possess? What hopes and dreams did they nurture between the ages of 16 and 24? College-educated young women, particularly African Americans, of the late 1950s and 1960s frequently faced constricted occupational opportunities and choices. What did the Louisiana women activists think that they would do after their schooling? What did they imagine as their futures? What kinds of clubs and organizations shaped their values in high school and college years? YWCA, NAACP Youth Council, CORE, Catholic youth organizations, or Baptist Training Unions?

Did the narrators become active as young people? If so, what impelled them towards activism? What most influenced them? What kind of activism did they choose? Direct-action demonstrations and community organizing, Voter-registration activities, Parents' organizations, Teachers' organizations, the NAACP, War on Poverty programs, such as Head Start, Community Action Programs (CAP), adult education, electoral politics or public service?

SOCIAL LEARNING

Did politics and community organizing become sites of "social learning," a process of interactive learning and skill-building among activists? Did Head Start and other community projects become "a community of learners" in which teachers and teachers' aides improved their own education and skills, and then took their knowledge back into their own communities?12

Dr. L. C. Dorsey, a voting-rights and Head Start activist in Bolivar County, Mississippi, witnessed great changes in many local people when federal monies brought by War on Poverty programs came into black delta communities. She believed that this was "the first time money came into the community that wasn't totally controlled by plantation owners and their agents." Movement participation had brought a new sense of self respect to many local activists. Additionally, said Dorsey,

Head Start gave women who had never done anything but chop cotton, clean white folks' houses, took care of white folks' children and their own families, an opportunity to have status and position in the community. They became wage earners. They became people who had money, and they invested that money back in the community through purchasing for their home and for their children, and they became people who were looked up to and who had status in their churches and in the community themselves. They were new people who were subjecting themselves to continuous training through what they called in-service programs where they were learning new information which they readily shared with other people in the community. I mean, it was really a beautiful thing to behold... They would bring home papers and flyers from the school and it would be shared with everybody in the community. Even the ones who couldn't read and write well would have had it explained to them at school so all of a sudden they were resource people for the community.13
Did local politics similarly become a site of accelerated social learning, as African Americans and white moderates learned the systems of local and state politics? Did grant-writing for the local funding of nationally-based initiatives in housing, health, and education become a method of learning and community development? Did public works and social welfare politics become arenas where activists learned skills that helped them to bring improvements to their communities? Or did these federally-driven programs merely become another form of politics as usual in the post-Movement South, just another source of political patronage?

BLACK POWER AND COMMUNITY CONFLICT

In the late 1960s and 1970s what impact did black nationalism and the Black Power movement have on intellectual, political, and social life? New Orleans, for example, was the home of the Free Southern Theater for a number of years, as well as the Congo Square Writers' Union and other arts associations. How did these groups influence the local cultural life and art? Did black nationalism and cultural nationalism spur a renewed appreciation of and interest in the cultures of West Africa and the Caribbean? Did the arts and values of these sites become influential (again) in New Orleans' and Louisiana's African American artistic and cultural life?

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many radical organizations fused politics and cultural issues in pursuing economic and social objectives. In 1969, for example, students at Southern University at New Orleans (SUNO) staged a revolt against campus conditions. In 1970, a group of activists from the Black Panther Party settled briefly into the Desire housing project before a well-publicized battle with city police. Did these events have wider effects within New Orleans' African American neighborhoods and communities? Did they have ripple effects in terms of the city's writers and artists? How did the resurgence of African American nationalism affect narrators' identities, political perspectives, worldviews? Did a renewed sense of Pan-Africanism emerge among some groups of local activists in Louisiana?

In many southern states, white moderates responded to the increasing black vote of the late 1960s and early 1970s by forming coalitions with middle-class African American leaders. In some areas, this moderate coalition functioned to undermine the power of grassroots leaders who had dominated early community organizing vehicles like Head Start projects. Who gave up power voluntarily? Who was displaced by the opening of the political system to black voters and political leaders? How did new conflicts emerge? Over what issues?

In a poor state like Louisiana, were War on Poverty projects sites of political struggle and control? Did conflicts over control of monies emerge between grassroots and middle-class African Americans and white moderates? Did white conservatives attempt to derail programs, as they did in several other southern states? Did federal programs come into conflict with local political machines? How was this played out? How did Black Power demands affect local politics? Did these movements provoke generational and social conflicts within African American communities? If so, what were the fault lines? What was the long-term effect of the Black Power and nationalist movements on local communities, families, individuals?
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IMPACT OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

In the years since the Movement’s actions and successes, former leaders have voiced varied judgments of the long-term effect of the Second Reconstruction. A number of Mississippi narrators asserted, as did some in New Orleans, that opportunities were indeed open to bright, ambitious and well-educated young African Americans. Below the ranks of this fabled “Talented Tenth,” or even talented third, however, too many young people still grew up in poverty and fear in the 1990s. Poor public school systems, low-wage jobs, and dangerous neighborhoods were too often the conditions in which poor young people struggled to mature. Narrators evaluated this continuing, and even widening class divide within black communities as the product of a successful social revolution that produced political victories without changing much about the structure of inequality that is a foundation of American capitalism. In 1978, Oretta Castle Haley recalled the political victories won by the movement as important, but

To me, the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act [of 1965] were not nearly as important or as significant as the kind of spiritual and internal change that developed in people and how black people began to really understand their situation in this country and then began to see themselves as a people. To me, that was the most significant and important thing that occurred in the Movement.16

While structural assessments like Haley’s are important, we must also ask narrators very specific questions about local politics, victories, and defeats. What happened in communities? Were old patterns of leadership in local black and white communities challenged? What impact did this have? Did new community leaders emerge from the movement, especially from the voter registration projects, or from Head Start, CAP, and public service roles? What about among public school teachers and parent-teacher organizations? Did the Movement’s success provoke stresses within families and in neighborhoods?

JUDGMENTS OF HISTORY

What do the activists feel that they and their communities gained and lost since the Movement years ended? What is better? What has been lost? What relationships within communities and families are better as a result of the Movement’s changes? What relationships have suffered?

I ask these questions because many of the people I have interviewed in both New Orleans and in the Mississippi Delta have expressed very ambivalent feelings about the nature of changes that have occurred in African American communities since the Movement years. The consequences of school desegregation, the proliferation of drugs in many communities, and a perceived distance between many young people and their elders worry women and men who are concerned with the mental and emotional health of their communities. Many former activists also feel disappointed with the lack of observable changes in the lives of working-class and poor African Americans.
In 1995, Juanita Scott, a Head Start administrator in Cleveland, Mississippi, said that "integration was one of the worst things that happened to black people, when they went to school. They lost all of their identity. They lost all of their dignity. They just lost it, and now they are fat in the minds, and they have no direction." Scott was one of ten children raised on a share-cropping farm in Sunflower County by her strong-minded mother after the family had been abandoned by her father. Scott valued the lessons of discipline, hard work, and studiousness that her mother taught to all of her children. These lessons prepared her for activism when the Civil Rights Movement came to Sunflower County, and Scott met her idol, the legendary organizer Fannie Lou Hamer. Scott looked to her mother and siblings as examples of hard work, educational effort, and self-discipline. But as she looked at many younger people in Indianola and in Cleveland, Mississippi, of the 1990s, she despaired. Scott and other activists have contended that the segregated all-black schools had been very important instruments in the socialization and education of young people. Looking at the consolidated, overwhelmingly black, desegregated public schools, she asserted,

We are losing a generation now. We’ve got people over there [in the school system] that don’t care what they do. And then our young parents don’t care what [the children] do. So that’s when you lost the togetherness from the church, the home, the school, and when you lose that communication, you lose that child. You lose your community, and that’s what has happened . . . And that has caused our problem, I feel.18

While Scott spoke with pride of her experiences with voter registration projects and with the creation of Head Start programs in Sunflower and Bolivar Counties, she was disappointed by the political and social apathy and materialism that she saw in her community in the 1990s. "As a whole, our community seems to be regressing sometimes instead of progressing. There are not enough positive changes in the minds of people. They are not registering to vote, and that is the key to success in any community." Scott defined progress as:

people looking out for themselves, people going to school and educating themselves. They are regressing in that instead of progressing. We have more people dropping out of school now than at the time we couldn’t even go to school. The children at that time wanted to go to school. I guess they wanted that escape. These children today don’t have anything to do, so they don’t even want to go, they don’t want to do anything, so they won’t even go, they don’t want to do anything.19

Juanita Scott voiced a particular kind of disappointment and grief that we heard from many former Movement leaders. African American women and men often looked at the hardships of their childhoods as good training for the rigors of political activism and for life itself. In their narratives, experiences of early farm labor, poor schools, and poverty or near-poverty appear to be key factors in their development as strong individuals who have persevered through the Movement years, political careers, and disruptive social change. Like Scott, many activists seem to have developed a reverential feeling for both the difficulties of their coming up years, and for the stresses and gains of the Movement experience.
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This is to be expected: we tend to cherish those experiences that we associate with our own personal development as individuals. We all feel driven to affirm our experiences (even those of great difficulty) in creating a coherent sense of our lives. So activists often find powerful lessons of moral courage and personal growth in the families and networks of the segregated African American community, and in the Movement community of the civil rights struggle. In both instances, leaders learned their capacities, and simultaneously learned to challenge and to extend themselves. Such developmental lessons are so very strong, so clearly and closely associated with a narrator’s mature sense of self, that it may become difficult for individuals to disengage their extraordinary historical and personal experience from a kind of inevitable disappointment with the ordinariness of their subsequent lives in the seemingly fragmented, individualistic, and media-saturated society in the 1990s.

I wonder, however, if such a powerful grounding in the epic struggles of two embattled communities—the segregated black community, and the Movement community—somehow robs some leaders of their ability to see their present world as a place of different opportunities and possibilities? Might activists like Scott possess a very American vision of progress and opportunity as a kind of linear, uni-directional ascent? If that is the case, how might they and other Americans come to appreciate change as, in fact, a Pandora’s box of unintended consequences? And to perceive that for some people, a mirage of choices may result in unproductive acts and wasted opportunities? Do we, as Americans, expect too much from progress, from opportunity, or from the promise of an equality of condition? Many former activists have indeed been to the mountain of peak experiences of personal transformation and collective efficacy. But these experiences are historically rare, and are suffered and survived by only a small segment of any population. Having been to such peaks, can one wholeheartedly appreciate the prosaic and often disappointing course of ordinary history? Perhaps more importantly, can we as Americans come to understand that even necessary social changes can produce negative and disruptive results?

PERSONAL GROWTH

Perhaps the most compelling stories that have emerged from generations of political leaders are those that involve personal transformations in which individuals move from fear to fearlessness, and from individual discontent to a sense of collective unity and strength. Such changes often involve individual development and transformation in an interactive and collective context. Many people have described the Movement culture and experience as a vehicle of education, understanding, and self-improvement. Through voter education campaigns, community organizing drives, and in Head Start centers, women and men learned about democracy, collective power, and about themselves. The last set of questions I would ask would be directed toward these lasting, sometimes contradictory internal and external changes: What is the meaning to you of the changes that you have helped to make? From what have you learned the most? What did you find the greatest value in doing? What do you regret nationally, culturally, or personally? Of what are you proudest? What do you count as major blessings? What do you see as defeats? What do you hope for? Are you happy?
For some of the women I have interviewed over the last twenty years, the gains of political activism have been double-edged. Achieving a heightened consciousness and awareness through the Movement frequently produced a greater responsiveness and sensitivity to social problems. But experiences of leadership also made some women less content with the sluggishness of political change and with attitudes of people in their communities and in the government. Many also expressed a wary distrust of the comfortable American lifestyles that they had once hoped to live. In 1989, Doris Jean Castle-Scott summed up her own journey. Had she not been part of the Movement, she allowed, she might have achieved a normal middle-class life:

But I don't know that I would have been as valuable to myself as I feel that I am, because I did experience what I experienced in the Civil Rights Movement... I don't think that I would have had the opportunity to grow out of myself both inwardly and outwardly. And by grow, I guess I can only define that by saying that everything I have come to know, I have come to understand that I was decisional about it.20

In a 1988 interview, Rosa Keller described her involvement in interracial politics as a "cause" and an "education." Early in her activist career, Keller had explained her role in New Orleans with the phrase, "I walk in two worlds," one composed of upper-class whites, the other filled with African American activists and white liberals. While Keller considered herself to be a "nice mother, and a nice grandmother" in the 1980s, her identity was most firmly fixed to her role as an activist. She asked, "What other cause would I have had?" She had never desired the career of a socialite, she said, "and if you spend your life playing bridge, or belonging to the garden club, I don't believe that you can have a satisfied old age."21

Those of us who have an opportunity to learn from the veteran activists among us should be aware that we are in the presence of a rich treasure of historical knowledge and memory. The stories of women activists powerfully combine two important tasks of human development, personal moral growth, and participation in a collective action that changed the conditions of life for ordinary people. I hope that we can all reflect on the value of activists' experiences and stories for our own lives, and for those who follow us.

NOTES

1 Kim Lacy Rogers, *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1993). An earlier version of the essay was presented at the Public Forum: "Louisiana Women in the Civil Rights Era: From Memory to Education," held at Southern University at New Orleans, 23 March 2002, and sponsored by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities, Southern University at New Orleans, and Xavier University of Louisiana. The organizers of the Public Forum were Dr. V. P. Franklin and Ms. Florence Borders.

2 Between 1995 and 1998, Owen Brooks, Jerry W. Ward, Jr., and I interviewed 100 African American community leaders in Bolivar, Coahoma, Sunflower, and Washington Counties in Mississippi under the auspices of the Delta Oral History Project (DOHP). The Delta Project was funded by a Collaborative Research Grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and was supported by Dickinson and Tougaloo Colleges, which contributed personnel and resources to the effort.
Interview tapes and transcripts are open to researchers at the Tougaloo College Archives in the Zenobia Coleman Library, and at the Community Studies Center Archives at Dickinson College.


Interview with Pauline Holmes by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, 6 March, 1996, Mound Bayou, MS, Delta Oral History Project (DOHP), Tougaloo College Archives, Zenobia Coleman Library, and Community Studies Center Archives, Dickinson College.

Sarah Williams and Flossie B. Miller, Interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, 7 March 1966, Cleveland, MS, transcript pp. 5–6, 28–31, DOHP.


Mary Tyler Dotson, Interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, 2 October, 1995, Indianola, MS, transcript pp. 3–6, DOHP.


Dr. L. C. Dorsey, Interview by Owen Brooks, Kim Lacy Rogers, and Jerry W. Ward, Jr., 18 July, 1997, Ridgeland, MS, transcript pp. 32–33, DOHP.


In a number of places in the Mississippi Delta, for example, Head Start teachers and community outreach workers recruited new voters as they visited impoverished families to recruit children for the early education program. Although this activity was not sanctioned by federal guidelines or authorities, Head Start centers emerged as important power nodes for new black voting organizations that registered poor and working-class African Americans. See Kim Lacy Rogers, *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change* (forthcoming).

Oretha Castle Haley, Interview by Kim Lacy Rogers, 27 November 1978, New Orleans, LA, Kim Lacy Rogers-Glenda B. Stevens Collection, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, LA.


Juanita Scott, Interview by Owen Brooks and Kim Lacy Rogers, Cleveland, MS, transcript p. 19. DOHP.

Scott's despair about the Delta's public schools of the 1980s reflects a widespread distrust of state educational policies and funding among African American Delta residents. In the early 1990s, the Delta's public schools were overwhelmingly black, poorly funded and equipped, and suffered high attrition rates among students. Geographer Clyde Woods noted that in the early 1990s, "Only 54 percent of all adults in the Delta had a high school diploma, but only 38 percent of African American adults; on the average, 25 percent of all students drop out every year." Moreover, in "1988, in the eleven most heavily African American counties in the Delta, the graduation rate was only 25.9 percent." Dismal as these figures are, they suggest an improvement from the past. In 1950, only 25 percent of blacks aged 15–19 were even enrolled in school; comparable figures for 1940 and 1930 were 11 percent and 4 percent, respectively. See Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and..."

20 Rogers, Righteous Lives, 179.

21 Rogers, Righteous Lives, 158–159.