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# DEGREES OF CHANGE

## MYLES HORTON'S LIFETIME COMMITMENT TO RADICAL EDUCATION

by Sue Thrasher

I first read about him in 1961. My hometown newspaper, a small, eight-page weekly, was suddenly filled with stories about the local man accused of running a communist training school. The story ran for several weeks and was definitely the biggest story of the year.

I didn't know anything at the time about the civil rights movement, but having grown up in Cold War America, I thought that communism had to do with the threat of "foreign" domination. These articles were confusing, however. The only criteria for being called a communist appeared to be advocating interracial gatherings. This man Myles Horton admitted to that.

It was another three years before I actually met him, critical years between 1961 and 1964 that drastically changed us and the region. I left our hometown and went to school in Nashville, where there was an active civil rights movement. I began to put together values I had learned in a country Methodist church with the everyday contradictions swirling around me, and gradually became an active participant in the movement.

Like many other white Southerners, I developed a love/hate relationship with the region and fought a losing battle to deny my cultural roots. The Easter bombing of four young girls in a Birmingham church in 1963 made me understand once and for all that if I didn't speak and act on behalf of my own values, others would speak for me.

I decided to stay and fight. It was inevitable that my involvement in the movement would lead me to the Highlander Center and to the man whose "communist training school" had been closed by the state of Tennessee.

MYLES HORTON'S IDEA OF A SCHOOL for mountain people had taken shape in the Depression South of the late 1920s. As a vacation Bible school teacher in the small Cumberland Mountain community of Ozone, Tennessee, Horton discovered that as a teacher he didn't need to have all the answers; people could find their own

answers by pooling their knowledge.

After graduating from Cumberland University, he spent the next four years looking for a model for the kind of school he wanted to create. His quest took him to Union Theological Seminary, the University of Chicago, and finally to Denmark for a closer look at the Danish Folk High Schools. Finally on a Christmas eve in Copenhagen, he admitted that he would never have all the answers until he had a place, a situation, and people. On one of his notecards, he wrote, "Purpose and situation depend on factors you can't know anything about...forget all the methods...find the place...the people...the situation. Use your ideas as a lodestone and move into the thing and start."

In the fall of 1932, Myles and his new partner, Don West, moved into the small community of Summerfield and opened the doors of their folk school. In short order, they were offering classes to the local community and beginning to journey to the small town of Wilder, Tennessee, where a coal miners

strike was in progress. After gathering information about threats on the life of the strike leader, Myles was arrested; the charge: "getting information and going back and teaching it." He liked to recall years later that it was the only time the charges against him had been on target.

Throughout the 1930s and '40s, Highlander was predominantly a labor school, working closely with the member unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Although the school operated with an interracial policy, it was clearly an island in the segregated environment of the South.

Union members found that their education came as much from their social and living arrangements while at Highlander as from their classes on how to put out a local newsletter or run a meeting using parliamentary procedure. It soon became clear to the staff that the movement for equality had to be the next item on the agenda, and in early 1953, one year before the Supreme Court decision on *Brown vs. Board of Education*, Highlander began planning a series of workshops to help community leaders prepare for desegregation.

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**FOR MOST OF HIS LIFE,  
MYLES WAS OUTSIDE  
THE MAINSTREAM, A  
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WHOSE COMMITMENT TO  
SOCIAL JUSTICE EXACTED  
A HIGH PRICE.**

Those workshops and the aftermath of the Brown decision were the beginning of an intense 20-year struggle in which the work of the school focused almost entirely on the freedom movement. It was during this period that Myles helped develop one of the most extraordinary literacy programs in the nation—the “citizenship schools”—that began on a small island off the coast of Charleston and spread throughout the South. Black people were taught by other black people how to read and write and vote.

Although Highlander had always been controversial, its increasing involvement in the civil rights struggle made it even more vulnerable, and in 1959 state troopers staged a raid on the school and arrested several staff members. It was the opening salvo in an all-out campaign by the state to close the school. An investigation by the state legislature and a sensationalized trial in Grundy County followed. In 1961, the school’s charter was revoked, and all of its assets were seized and sold at public auction.

When the doors to the Highlander Folk School were padlocked by the Grundy County sheriff in 1961, Myles responded that you can padlock a building but not an idea. “Highlander is an idea,” he said. “You can’t kill it, and you can’t close it in. It will grow wherever people take it.”

Operating under a new charter as the Highlander Research and Education Center, the idea was taken to the freedom movement of “Mississippi Summer,” the Poor People’s March on Washington, the anti-poverty and strip-mining movements in Appalachia, the occupational health and safety struggles of cotton mill workers and coal miners, and to workplaces and communities concerned about a safe, toxic-free environment.

THE SOUTHERN MOUNTAIN SCHOOL that Myles envisioned is now in its 58th year. Since his death in January 1990, several people have asked, “What will happen to Highlander now?” While it is true that Myles embodied the idea of Highlander more than any other single individual, it is also true that Highlander was never a one-person operation. From the beginning, he worked in concert with others.

Don West, Jim Dombrowski, Zilphia Johnson (who Myles fell in love with and married), Ralph Tefferteller, Zilla Hawes, and Mary Lawrence all helped build a Southern labor movement through their work with Highlander. Septima Clark and Bernice Robinson were instrumental in creating, nurturing, and expanding the citizenship schools.

In 1971, Myles retired officially from his capacity as executive director of Highlander, knowing that it was necessary for new leadership to emerge. He never lost his curiosity about the world and people working to change it, and his retirement from the day-to-day activities allowed him to travel to China, Southeast Asia, India, New Zealand, and throughout Latin America, meeting

and talking with community educators and activists.

Myles always brought back what he had learned to the Highlander staff, and advocated persistently that any work around issues of social change and justice in this country had to be within an international context. In 1983, he helped organize an exchange between Latin American and North American adult educators, an encounter that led to further exchanges and the development of an international program committee at Highlander.

For most of his life, Myles was outside the mainstream, a radical educator whose commitment to social justice exacted a high price. He was physically beaten, verbally harassed, and never had much in the way of material goods. Finally, in the late 1970s, his work as an educator began to gain recognition, and late in life he was the recipient of several awards and honorary degrees. He was not impressed by any of this recognition, but used each occasion to advocate his philosophy of education and social change.

When Bill Moyers did a two-hour special profile on him, Moyers had a hard time finishing a question before Myles would begin to answer. Teased about this later, Myles simply responded: “He gets to be on television all the time; this was my only chance.”

His experiential philosophy of education was most similar to that of popular educators from the Third World such as Paulo Freire, and he called it “education for social change.” It was based on respect for people’s knowledge and a firm belief that people could change. He used to say that you always have to look at people with two eyes: seeing them as the person they are now, and also seeing them as the person they could become.

While Myles was a master storyteller, he knew that “telling stories” and sharing experiences was only the beginning of learning. The next step was collective analysis of those experiences in order to change concrete situations. He maintained that an unexamined event was merely a happening.

He worked right up until the final weeks of his life, saving some of his last energy for a meeting with Paulo Freire so that the two of them could discuss their forthcoming “spoken” book. He battled cancer with the same ferocity that he had battled all of life’s other injustices, and in doing so, continued to teach all of us around him about the value of life.

I had no idea in 1961 that the man with the so-called communist training school would become a major mentor and friend. The first thing he taught me was that I didn’t have to be ashamed of being from the South; the second was that I had a responsibility to change it. I am one of a multitude of people whose lives he touched and changed. His “ideas” will go where all of us take them.

*SUE THRASHER, of Savannah, Tennessee, was on the staff of the Highlander Center from 1978 to 1986. She is currently working on a doctorate at the Center for International Education at the University of Massachusetts.*

Highlander Center photo

