

Thoughts on Port Huron, Bob Zellner

I was there and the most important thing was not to require a loyalty oath of movement participants. The energy saved by refusing to red-bait when right into action for freedom, or organizing.

It's important what a person believes, so tell me what you think, but more importantly, tell me what you do and have done. In Alabama I saw folks chanting affirmations of faith, knowing they did not mean it. My quest became why people's actions and beliefs were so far apart. I was fascinated with why so few white Southerners risked life and limb or even ostracism and poverty in the struggle against segregation and racial oppression.

Searching for authenticity, commitment and risk, as well as harmony between belief and action, I sought people doing things challenging and exciting to me. The second of five boys with a schoolteacher mother and preacher father, it was unlikely I would meet Dr. Martin Luther King and Ms Rosa Parks as a college student in Montgomery and become part of America's most exciting History – the Civil Rights Movement. Perhaps it was providential that my Methodist College, Huntingdon, was located in Montgomery, the cradle of the modern civil rights struggle.

My odyssey from KKK to MLK was a stretch. Dad, James Abraham Zellner, a Methodist minister was once a Klan organizer, a Kleagle. He and Mom, Ruby Hardy Zellner, graduated from Bob Jones College now located in Greenville, SC Even though it is now called a "university," it is not widely known as a hot bed of Southern Liberalism. What's worse, I was named for Dr. Bob Jones after he performed the marriage of Mom and Dad. In 2012-speak, that means I come from a line of Fundamentalist Terrorist. I must have been a disappointment to Godfather Dr. Bob. Have you ever noticed how fundamentalism and terrorism go together?

The nexus is ubiquitous throughout history. A fundamentalist, Muslim, Christian, or any other can be peace loving and protect those inside his circle. As a fundamentalist, however, his ability and willingness to harm those outside his circle, i.e. infidels, is altered. Not only is the fundamentalist allowed to harm others, his creed may even require him to do so. Presently a fundamentalist, then, depending on circumstances, voila, a terrorist is born. My father, grandfather and uncles in Birmingham were Klan activists. A more ruthless gaggle of terrorist is hard to imagine. Was their Klavern responsible for killing four little girls guilty of nothing more than going to Sunday school at the 16th Avenue Church one September morning in 1963?

Telling stories about "deadheading" across the country while working on the railroad, Granddaddy Zellner worked as a telegrapher and later a dispatcher for Gulf Mobile and Ohio. I never thought of his bustling metropolis as the "Johannesburg" of America.

With this wrenching background, then, it's not surprising my outlook became that of an existential Marxist attempting to follow Jesus - schools of thought and action clearly at odds with one another. When one believes in dialectics and uses the philosophy to learn about the universe, one becomes comfortable with uncertainty and discomfort. Some early mentors advocated the adoption of an attitude of "creative insecurity." Democracy itself, they pointed out, is an exercise in dialectics or creative insecurity. To maintain our civil liberties we must allow those who would take away our civil liberties the right to speak. The Klan can rally, the neo-Nazis can advocate and the ignoramuses of the

Tea Party are free to bloviate. Progressives, countering with better organizing, bigger marches, and debate rather than trying to outlaw rightwing first amendment rights, will win every time.

In time of war, like the present one with terrorists of various types around the world, we must fight fiercely to maintain our civil liberties. It's nonsensical to say our freedoms are under attack by fundamentalist terrorists; therefore we must give up a corner stone of democracy - the right to be safe in our persons. Sad to say, since 9/11 Americans have given up habeas corpus, the right to a fair trial through due process, without a whimper in the name of national security.

Spirituality, more important to me than religiosity, allows me to take the best from all religions and paths of enlightenment. Fundamentalist Muslims, I find, are just as capable of misconstruing the concept of jihad as Christian fundamentalists are of misinterpreting the concept of crusade. Looking back, trying to unravel the threads woven into this spiritual, philosophical fabric, my personal trope continues to be towards action. We are products of all we experience, therefore the above caveat - "now tends to be," warns that this current outlook could change.

I discovered a new intellectual universe in 1957 when Rev. Charles Prestwood, a newly minted Doctor of Divinity just returned from Boston University, encouraged us college freshmen to "break our cups." On fire with the social gospel, Dr. Prestwood, in a deliberate act of subversive teaching, advocated breaking our cups, even though they run over with goodness and abundance. He wanted us to actually question all the things we had been taught in church.

I was able to sit at the feet of Dr. Prestwood and other progressive ministers only through the miracle of Dad's conversion from KKK to the inclusive social gospel. Breaking with family and the Klan, he worked with Dr. King, Rev. Joe Lowery in Mobile, Prestwood, Thomas Lane Butts, and others attracted to the work being done by SNCC and SCLC, the Southern Christian Leadership Council.

Dr. Butts, my early mentor, is currently pastor emeritus of First United Methodist Church in Monroeville, Alabama serves as the main helper to Harper Lee, author of TO KILL A MOCKINGBIRD.

My interest in race and justice, kick-started by Charles Prestwood was aided and abetted by Dr. Tom Butts. My generation of Methodist youth was fortunate to have several young ministers in segregated Alabama spreading subversion quietly among my cohort of the teenage faithful. I found a blog, which brings Doctors Prestwood and Butts together in one paragraph. It is typical of both that they emphasize the organizer's responsibility to avoid hubris in their work. Tom Butts recently reported: "A friend and colleague, the late Dr. Charles M. Prestwood, who had unusual insight into the games people play in order to gain power without taking responsibility, wrote: 'The divisions of our day in part grow out of the fact that as slaves we begin by demanding justice and end by wanting to wear a crown.' There are some who never quite understand that we cannot wear the crown of thorns and also have the thirty pieces of silver. The truth is that our inclination to comment with authority and casually offer serious advice on every condition we encounter should be accompanied by an equally serious willingness to become actively involved in affecting the solutions we suggest."

Thomas Butts, in his eighties, continues to break cups, violate mores and he bends toward freedom. Prestwood's concern with divisions between people, and Butt's insistence that prescription and advice is meaningless in the absence of action toward solving problems, was the basis of my activism. Activist wasn't a word we used in SNCC in the 1960s, calling ourselves civil rights workers or "organizers." My

involvement, similar to that of many church-bred young southerners black and white, is mirrored by Casey Hayden, who recently wrote a luminous and haunting memory that speaks to my coming of age in the south. Casey and I, along with our cohort of movement adventurers, including Jane Stembridge, Connie Curry, Dorothy and Rob Burlage, Joan Browning, Anne and Howard Romaine, Ed Hamlett, Sam Shirah and other white southerners, understood each other and where we came from so well that we seldom felt the need to speak or write about the experience. Along with other white Southerners who rose up for freedom now and always, we are currently writing about growing up white and southern. In Casey's case, her piece was written for her former husband Tom Hayden's book on SDS and the history of the Port Huron statement. That declaration along with SNCC's statement of purpose (drafted by Rev. Dr. James Lawson) became twin manifestos of a legendary generation in American history.

"ONLY LOVE," she wrote, "IS RADICAL." I was a child of small town Texas, and of a single parent mom, a feminist. We were poor closet liberals. Austin was my Mecca. I [became] ...an existentialist at a residential community of learning alongside The University, the only integrated housing on campus, both by gender and by race. We met in rigorous seminars with a collegium of renegade Christian ministers, headed by a chaplain from WWII who'd seen the carnage, demythologizing the church fathers and scriptures; The collegium attempted to create a language of experience: ...Surrendering illusions through honesty, one was opened to creating meaning: an authentic life, freedom. This surrender into reality was "the Christ event". Our freedom, our commonality in receiving it, and our common task of passing it on, were realized in community through rituals of confession, forgiveness, surrender, and gratitude. ...We found a remnant of the social gospel, the campus YM-YWCA, as our outpost. I served at the Y's national conference. Men and women led workgroups as equals: Peace; Race Relations; the World of Work; The Changing Roles of Men and Women. Consciously breaking out of the silent postwar generation, we vowed to realize our values, a politics of authenticity. The 50's unfolded into the 60's, the sit-in movement their exalted opening."

Casey Hayden reminds me that it is a wondrous thing when southerners change. Her memory of being a stifled southerner hungry for change evokes my evolving consciousness more eloquently than I can write. Shakespeare said the play is the thing. My movement generation came to believe the ACT was the thing. Authentic politics compelled us to ACT against the evils around us - evils crying out for action. Emerging from the silent generation, we found ourselves surrounded by poisonous snakes inching closer and closer to our bare feet. Too long had foremothers and fathers talked of making change, we would actually make change. We accomplished a lot. By 1965 the public accommodations and voting acts had passed setting the stage for a social and economic revolution. The national liberal consensus, which had allowed the movement to succeed up to this point, broke down.

When serious change, like that advocated by Ms Ella J. Baker, was on the agenda, liberals ran for high ground. Ending de jure segregation and black voter exclusion certainly completed the bourgeois revolution, which was left unfinished following the civil war. That was okay, but moving to full social and economic equality in the sense Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Dubois and Ms Baker understood it, was not all right. No broad left national consensus moving toward socialist revolution existed. This was the end of the civil right movement.

Dr. King's assassination sealed the deal. When he worked to unionize garbage workers in Memphis while planning a poor peoples' march on the nation's capitol, it was over. The movement was changing. In 1966, SNCC had become an all black organization; so many of the white staff began working with SCEF, the Southern Conference Educational Fund. We answered the call to organize among and

with white Southerners. We started to reach poor and working class white Southerners, bringing them into coalitions with already organized grass roots black folk. We formed GROW, Grass Roots Organizing Work, also called Get Rid of Wallace. I remember the joy and amazement we felt on finding former Klansmen in Mississippi willing to switch sides and join the human race. One, M. O. McCarty, a member of Local 5-443 of the International Woodworkers of America, walked off the job, at Masonite Corporation after a shop steward was fired for supporting two workers who refused to do work not included in their job descriptions, had been a Klan enforcer.

Masonite, located in Laurel, Mississippi, was at that time the largest hardboard plant in the world. The union could easily have prevailed in the resulting wildcat strike had the union members been able to remain unified. The problem was the racial division between white and black workers. M.O. became a great friend, helping in the effort to bring white and black workers together. When criticized for having been in the Klan, M.O. said, "Yes, I'll admit I was in the KKK, even though I am not supposed to say so. I have always been a joiner. Whenever I go to church, if they open the doors to membership, I join. So far I'm a Methodist, a Baptist, a Presbyterian, and a Holiness, and yes, I was a Klansman, but now I have joined the civil rights."

Only later, much later, in fact twenty or thirty years on down the line, did we begin to view human nature as a hard thing to change. Had we known early on, we may never have attempted to do what we did in the GROW Project. As it was, we were lucky to stumble on a philosophy of working class organizing that was successful. Large numbers of poor and working class folks from the Deep South could best be reached on a material basis. All who could be reached with the basic movement idealistic message of Christian love, brother and sisterhood had been reached. The majority would have to see that their material wellbeing depended on them changing racist behavior like separate seniority lists at the plant which kept blacks from advancing in skill level and pay. A strike would pit black and white workers against each other rather than being together, strong in unity.

While contemplating the difficulty of making basic social change in the south I used all the psychology, sociology and history learned in several bouts with college and graduate school. I began to work on a social change theory called the shrunken heart syndrome.

Briefly stated it means that centuries of standing on the necks of fellow human beings inevitably shrinks the hearts of those doing the oppressing. Evolution apparently works on the mental and spiritual body as well as the physical one. I reasoned that during slavery, whites in North America, especially the south, maintained the institution through force, violence and terror. Enslaving a human is an act of war against that person. To make war against a person or a people, it becomes necessary to learn to hate "those people". To own a human, unlike owning a mule, the slaveholder must deny the humanity of that man, woman or child. So, growing up in south Alabama among a people who had, for centuries, practiced treating people like objects or mules, I was expected to go and do likewise. To accomplish such a degree of dehumanization, individuals in the owning group inevitably suffer a shriveling of their souls and spirit.

A small example of this process can be seen in farm children, trying to get over their tender heartedness when killing chickens, rabbits, pigs and other livestock. They manage somehow to harden their hearts. In the same way, southerners get over their innate dislike of mistreating others. They teach themselves and their children that, "Blacks aren't the same as you and I, and therefore you may mistreat them".

Imagine an entire region of people mistreating African Americans (a mild and profoundly understated way of describing slavery from 1617 to 1865) for over two hundred years. These same southern people re-enslaved black people under Jim Crow, the sharecropper and prisoners-for-purchase systems for the hundred years leading up to the voting act of 1965.

If you think it would be terrifying to grow up this way, you have some understanding of my early experience. That was the region of my childhood and adolescence; those were the people - friends, fellow church members, family, and acquaintances - I grew up around. They were steeped in racism and self-hatred to the point that nothing was as it seemed. Wouldn't they of necessity have shriveled hearts? Small hearts leave no room for the milk of human kindness. These are the people I grew up with. Has human kindness dried up in southern white people?

The South today continues to be a bottomland with acidic puddles of racist poison still stagnating. Old black women and men in Mississippi taught me that hate is an acid that corrodes the bucket it is carried in. This is especially true among older white people. Only 11% of whites voting in Alabama pulled the lever for our first black president, Barack Obama. Southerners call him "the foreigner," rejecting the legitimacy of a black President. During the current Republican primary, the entire roster of candidates referred to him as "Obama," never President Obama. They have done their best to intimidate this president from exercising leadership, ready to pounce on him for being an angry young black man. But he has shown leadership, most recently on the right to love the one you chose. Thank you President Obama for showing political courage, rare these days.

Growing up in lower Alabama, I learned that my Great- Granddaddy thought he could not do without slavery. Then Granddaddy Zellner thought he could not get along without segregation. My father's generation of southerners was sure they simply could not get along without opposite sex marriage.

Well I get along fine without slavery and I don't have a personal need for segregation. As for marriage, I have tried it twice without success and hope I am done with it. For those who like it, however, I am happy for them to have at it anyway they want it. Opposite sex, same sex, no sex, it is all the same for me.

Wait! Someone brought up bestiality. Was it Republican candidate, Santorum? Man on dog? That might actually give me pause, especially if the man wants to marry his best friend. Well it only gave me a pause, and a short one at that. If a woman wants to marry her dog and a man wants to marry his horse, who's to say it is not the right thing for them? No skin off my teeth, no harm no foul. Right?

I remember when Chuck McDew, former SNCC Chairman, and I visited my brother David and sister-in-law Ruth in a small town near Knoxville, Tenn. McDew, an African- American born in Massillon, Ohio, was fascinated by the jobs being held down, clung to actually, by my young nephews and their wives, all white southerners, born and bred. It was in the time of the Bush vs. Gore presidential race. We were eating in a Chinese buffet near the airport while waiting for our flight, surrounded by all these rural southerners so quite naturally Chuck asked whom everybody was voting for. Bush was their man one of my nephews proclaimed vigorously.

McDew allowed as how that did not seem right, given the bleak picture they had painted of employment in Knoxville. Looking perplexed, he questioned, "Didn't you say there no good paying jobs

and you make hardly enough to pay for gas to and from work? You work at Jiffy Lube, minimum wage and you at Burger King, same wage, one wife at the dry cleaners and another at Wall Mart, and Grandma Ruth has to take care of the babies? Why on earth would you vote for Texan George Bush over Tennesseean Gore?"

"Because," my kinfolk fairly shouted in unison, "Bush is going to protect us from gay marriage!" Chuck, completely flabbergasted by now, asked, "Do you know any gay people? Do you know any gay people who are getting married?"

They all agreed that they didn't know any gay people and didn't know if any of them were getting married.

Later at the airport McDew ruefully told me he had often worried about my poor white kinfolks, hoping they would be able to do better. "Now," he exclaimed, "After what I heard today from your poor nieces and nephews, I will never again worry about poor white people." Amen. So living with others continues to be a challenge in the South. In some ways young southerners are more open to change and less homophobic than their parents. But if the older generations continue to teach their prejudices to their offspring how long will it take. Failure to embrace diversity has allowed a bastion of reaction to invade our entire body politic and I fear the infestation will continue until my region undergoes a thorough change. Many thought the process of integrating the solid south with the rest of the nation was well underway by the end of the sixties - that the south would never go back to its old ways. FDR and his redoubtable wife Eleanor tried mightily to change the politics of my region coming out of the last Great Depression, declaring the South to be the nation's number one economic problem. Struggling to come out of this one, we find ourselves faced with the same problem. During Reconstruction, fair-minded people thought the south could never, would never, return to the all white courthouse and ballot box. In less than a generation, however, former slave owners using violence, ended reconstruction, reclaiming the south while disfranchising Negroes and their poor white allies. Similarly nobody thought the gains of women, blacks and other oppressed people during the civil rights movement could be taken away again in this country. Currently the GOP, having been hijacked by Tea Party racists and shills for corporate fascism, is doing just that. Will the tiny shrunken hearts of my fellow Southerners be able once again to stave off a concerted assault on its backwardness? Time will tell but there is hope. Challenges exist to be sure, but new and exciting promises are also present. Younger southerners like most young Americans are no longer as cowed by racism, paternalism, and homophobia as their parents and grandparents. More importantly there is a new respect for community organizing and positive social change. Our debonair young President Obama, after all, was a community organizer before trying his hand at leading the "free" world.

My region functions today as a safe rear for rightwing extremism and it anchors Tea Party white nationalism. Morris Dees of the Southern Poverty Law center warns of widespread arming and training of paramilitary extremists. He says that bullying and hatred of gays and immigrants is fueling impending violence on a grand scale. I think the ultra right is gearing up for a serious attempt to foment a new civil war in this country. The progressives and liberals on the left are woefully unprepared. This makes it imperative that progressives unite once and for all to bring the South into the national fold. And there is historical precedent for organizing the South as a way of liberalizing the body politic.

The south and other pockets of reaction in the West, skews our national politics violently rightward. A basic change in the South will change the politics of the whole country, making American democracy safe for the world. Even a small change could make the country and therefore the world a

healthier, safer place. Long-term community organizing seems to be the best solution to the Southern problem. **Operation Dixie** once attempted to unionize industry in the Southern United States. From 1946 to 1953 in 12 Southern states, labor tried to consolidate gains made by the trade union movement in the Northern United States during the war. Organized labor needed to block the status of the South as a "non-union" low-wage haven to which businesses could relocate. Failure of Operation Dixie to end the South's status as a low-wage, non-union haven impeded the ability of the union movement to maintain its strength in North and contributed to the decline of the American union movement in the second half of the twentieth century. Unions were unable to prevent businesses from holding back wage increases by either moving to the South or threatening to do so. The non-union South holds the nation back economically and has always impeded the fulfillment of civil and human rights. Presently there is no difference between organized labor and the civil rights movement.

My job as a scholar and activist, then, is to propose solutions, make plans and take action, so I am returning to the south after living and teaching in the north for many years. I moved to Wilson, North Carolina where Barton College is located at the end of my short street. A series of miracles landed me here. SNCC and movement people, being angels, will understand. I'm in an old house at the top of a hill near some woods where a bear reputedly lives. Ancient trees from the farm's pecan orchard shade our lot, which anchored vegetable fields along this ridge. I call it Seven Trees Farm. A downpour is drumming on the old roof, the first rain since I moved here April 13th, a Friday. Recently my old organizing friend, Al McSurely, introduced me to the remarkable Rev. Dr. William Barber, leader of a powerful and diverse coalition of fired up progressive southerners here in NC. Also I want to help focus national attention on the North Carolina Plan and the black power it represents, as well as assist John McNeil, wrongly convicted in Newt G's district of GA.

Wilson is also the home of John McNeil, an African-American basketball star sentenced to life for the death of a white attacker — a mirror image to Travon Martin. I helped his wife, Anita, who is battling a recurrence of breast cancer; draft a letter to Kerry Kennedy for defense funds.

My new home at Seven Trees Farm, with offices, freedom house and organizing school will serve the eastern black belt region of NC. Our work plan for the next four or five years is outlined in the following resolution being presented to the NAACP Convention this July in Houston, attempting to bring organized labor and the NAACP together in a new Operation Dixie. Titled, HOUSTON WE HAVE A PROBLEM! The plan includes the following ideas:

"In the 1960s and 1970s, national forces violently opposed to labor and civil rights, adopted a southern strategy to destroy civil rights organizations providing practical support for southern labor and human rights movements. For 40 years we've trod vineyards where the grapes of wrath are stored, waging local and state battles against powerful national forces with unlimited funds for their long-range plan to reinstate segregation, voter ID's, and the whole bag of old tricks of division and hatred.

A conference will convene in the Southern Regions, the 11 former confederate states where anti-labor and anti-civil rights practices continue to plague our neighborhoods, our work-places, our churches and other institutions where we live, work, worship and play; A proposal to be debated in the NAACP should emerge calling for a NAACP-Labor summit to negotiate a Southern Check-Off where *One Nation Organizing Fund* members can collect \$2 monthly to finance labor and civil rights organizers in 11 confederate states. \$2 of each NAACP member's dues will be set aside to rebuild the southern civil and labor rights movement.

Martin Halpern, professor of history at Henderson State University in Arkansas, and other labor scholars, wonders if organized labor can even survive in the U.S. In an article written for Portside, comparing and contrasting the policies and actions of Presidents Kennedy and Obama, both seen as pro-labor, and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, an ultra rightwing one per center out to destroy the last vestiges of collective bargaining. Unions have declined in the private sector, Halpern points out, and they are under assault in the public sector, the strongest part of the labor movement today. It is scary to me that the future of organized labor is so precarious. Mark Halpern sums up the situation: "Should Wisconsin voters June 5 retire Scott Walker for his anti-democratic actions, it will contribute to the movement to rescue our country from domination by the one percent. Likewise, by voting for Barack Obama in November, voters across the country will express their optimism that the president will continue to move in the direction of listening to the movements for peace and justice and support efforts for democratic workplaces. It is a good time to honor the legacy of John Kennedy: to listen to social and economic protest movements, respect unions for the good they do, and to promote the idea that government serves the people."

So Wisconsin voters and the NAACP/Labor organizing push may go a long way in saving collective bargaining. Such a joint plan could change the South from a bastion of the ultra right wing into a progressive region, making American democracy safe for the world, ending our skewed political spectrum which ranges now from far right to the ultra center.

NAACP and National Labor, establishing a National Organizing Committee will also plan the **50th Anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Justice** in front of the Lincoln Memorial honoring Dr. King and others of the Moses Generation. The NAACP and labor will then announce the funding and joint sponsorship of the One Nation Organizing Fund."

The North Carolina Conference of NAACP Branches is blazing the trail for a new era of organizing in the south and the rest of the nation. Rev. Dr. Barber and his cadre of organizers are also challenging the national NAACP to rededicate itself to grassroots organizing, honoring its glorious past. I was blessed to meet Ms Rosa Parks as a college student doing research for a sociology paper on the movement. She became a mentor to me and other students at all white Huntingdon College. Once, when trapped in a Montgomery church, Ms Parks helped five students escape arrest, but not before saying to me, "Bob, when you see something wrong you have to do something about it. You must take action – you can't study injustice forever."

Don't morn Wisconsin, organize!

Bob Zellner

June 12, 2012