

# BAYARD RUSTIN: A FAITHFUL LIFE

Thursday, March 15, 2012

## Reflections on Rustin's Work for Peace

Reference: "Rustin to the New York Monthly Meeting," August 15, 1942, from *I Must Resist: Bayard Rustin's Life in Letters*, Michael G. Long, editor. (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2012), pages 1-2.

I knew Bayard during the last fifteen years of his life. My recollection is of a public intellectual – a writer of newspaper columns, a world traveler in humanitarian causes, an art collector, a formidable debater, and a humorist with a mischievous sense of irony. Although Bayard was embroiled in some controversies during those years, I remember him as being a relaxed and comfortable person who never wrote anyone off as an implacable opponent. I was twenty-four years younger than Bayard, and was a kind of protégé of the circle of people with whom Bayard was friends here in New York City. Thus, I saw him in relaxed social settings, and enjoyed his wonderful skills as a conversationalist. But I did not press him as hard as I might have about certain things if I had known I would be standing here 35 years later trying to give account of what I know about his thought.

The letter which we have just heard was written when Bayard was only thirty years old. Yet in one way or the other it expresses much of what was to follow in Bayard's life.

It is a little difficult to grasp what, exactly, was on the minds of the Friends of Fifteenth Street Monthly Meeting when it was proposed that they offer hospitality to members of the armed forces passing through New York City. Pacifist Friends should always empathize with the humanity and integrity of members of the military. Yet, offering hospitality to people passing through on the way to battle seems somewhat far-fetched as a peace church undertaking. It does remind us that Quakers had a wide range of responses to World War II, seen by many as a just war against the forces of fascist evil. More Quakers joined the military in that war than conscientiously objected to participation in it. So the gesture of hospitality was not entirely inconsistent with the climate of opinion among the Friends of that time.

Bayard's letter illustrates several things.

First, he had an independent turn of mind, and was not inclined to go along just in order to get along. In the face of much compromising with the war system among Friends, he forthrightly objects to the proposal which had been laid before the meeting.

Second, Bayard was a formidable debater. In two and a half pages he covers all the bases in a closely reasoned and eloquent argument.

Third, at the stage of his life when he wrote the letter Bayard was an absolute pacifist. He was a Friend totally committed to the traditional Quaker Peace Testimony.

The first characteristic I mentioned, his independent turn of mind, was illustrated in many ways in his later life. I will mention just one. When race relations became polarized, and

black nationalist sentiment was very much in the air, especially following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Bayard stuck steadfastly to an integrationist view, insisting always that black people and white people had to work together. When rioting broke out in the inner cities, Bayard himself was in the streets advocating for calm and peace.

The second characteristic I mentioned was that Bayard was a formidable debater. These skills at reasoning and debating were put to the service of Friends most notably when Bayard served as a co-author of the pamphlet *Speak Truth th Power*, one of the most influential and widely read pacifist pamphlets ever produced. In fact, the title of the pamphlet first appears in the present letter. Bayard attributes the phrase to a speaker at Friends General Conference, although research indicates that the phrase was never used there; it simply represented Bayard's felicitous and eloquent distillation of the gist of the points made at the meeting.

The third characteristic which the letter expresses is that at the time he wrote the letter Bayard was an absolute pacifist. Shortly after writing the letter to the meeting, Bayard returned his draft card to his draft board, declaring that the conscription system which made the prosecution of the war possible was as evil as the war itself, and that he would not cooperate with such a system. He thereby declined the opportunity, of which many other Friends availed themselves, of serving in the Civilian Public Service Camps mentioned in the letter, and instead Bayard went to jail.

I believe it is fair to report that Bayard's anti-war stance, manifested so forcefully and convincingly at age 30, got blurred later in life. Perhaps this was partly due to the situation he occupied. It is one thing to state absolutely what you see as the truth about peace and war when you are 30 years old and employed by a pacifist organization. It is quite another when you are trying to assemble a broad coalition of people of varying views so as to have a political impact on the one or two specific issues which drew the diverse coalition together. Later in life, when Bayard was working for the A. Philip Randolph Institute, he was trying to develop sympathy and collaboration between civil rights activists, on the one hand, and organized labor, on the other. Organized labor was not, at that time, a hotbed of pacifism. At any rate, back in the 1970s, Bayard ended up organizing and signing a big advertisement in the *New York Times* advocating the sale of fighter jets to Israel, an act which absolutely astounded many of his pacifist friends. Bayard also maintained a troubling silence about the Vietnam War, even though Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was taking a great risk in vigorously and publically opposing the War. So Bayard, who in earlier days had tutored Dr. King in non-violence, was invisible when Dr. King courageously made the connection between foreign wars and domestic oppression.

Bayard's approach to these issues was by no means unprincipled. He advanced, with his usual debater's skill, a philosophy about transitioning from protest to politics. According to Bayard, the protester, and a social protest movement, must always be uncompromising, whereas, in contrast, politics in a democracy always involves compromise. So Bayard saw himself as moving from protest to politics, hoping for the consolidation of real gains for his constituencies through doing so.

As I mentioned, I am twenty-four years younger than Bayard. In other words, I am in the

generation which followed the famous Civilian Public Service Camp cohort which did so much to uphold the principles of justice and peace once World War II was over. But as years passed I saw many of Bayard's peers, my elders, waffle on issues of non-violence. Bayard was unique, at least in my view, in that he waffled toward the center, towards the mainstream, as part of his transition from protest to politics. Most others I observed waffled in the other direction – compromising their pacifism in favor of revolutionary violence. Sometimes this involved a fairly simple thing, like overlooking the intent of fellow demonstrators to engage in violent tactics without either insisting on a non-violent discipline or withdrawing themselves from the action; sometimes it was more complex, as when pacifist leaders developed elaborate theories about how non-violence is only relevant for comfortable middle-class Americans, and oppressed people should be given practical support in their struggles to liberate themselves through violence.

Pacifists of Bayard's generation who were war objectors had placed themselves on the sidelines during World War II, a war which came to be regarded as a heroic struggle against absolute evil. There followed quickly the Cold War and the nuclear arms race, and for long decades these same pacifist people were once again marginalized, serving only as a few voices crying in the wilderness as the nation seemed to head with great conviction and unity towards a nuclear Armageddon. As the end of their careers swung into view in the 1970s and 1980s, there was, inevitably, an overwhelming hunger, not for power or money, but for relevance, for a noticeable spot on the historical landscape, and it is this hunger for relevance which I believe fed the compromises which I have mentioned.

No one can deny that politics in a democracy involves compromise. But what happens to a democracy when those who should be valiant and steadfast in the truth themselves become the compromisers? Franklin Delano Roosevelt gave us a reformed economic system and Lyndon Baines Johnson gave us far-reaching civil rights legislation and the Great Society. Each of these master politicians and great compromisers had vigorous protest movements nipping at their heels, egging them on, establishing a framework, a set of boundaries, within which the compromising took place. Today we have in the White House one of the most decent, intelligent, and eloquent people ever elected president, and yet a massively disappointing presidency. Universal single payer health care was taken off the table without even a struggle. Bankers, the fossil fuel industry, agribusiness, and the security state are all running amok, making a sham of democracy in the political sphere, and destroying all the rules of fair play in the economic sphere. Voter suppression statutes in many states are instituting Jim Crow for everyone. An "Occupy" movement has at long last become visible as a protest, but it remains weak, disorganized and largely inarticulate.

How different might all this have been if the leaders of the great social energies of the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement had staid the course of their idealism? The answer to this question would only be speculation, obviously. Nor do we want to get into arid debates about unrealistic idealists, on the one hand, and sell-outs, on the other. Yet the role in producing social change of both politics and protest, of compromise and of steadfast faithfulness to the truth, does remain something well-worth arguing about.

*Daniel A. Seeger*