

Robert Moses

Address at 75th Birthday Celebration for Ella Jo Baker, December 9, 1978, Carnegie International Center, New York City.

Transcription by Clayborne Carson

The children call Miss Baker "Aunt Ella," and she is part of our extended family [Introduces four children, who were born in Tanzania, and wife, Janet.] I turn over thoughts in my mind, and I turn over in my mind Miss Baker. I've done that now for ten years--couple of years in Canada, six years in Tanzania, a couple more years back here. And I turn over different things about her and different scenes. The first time we actually met was in the SCLC office in Atlanta in 1960, and we found out that we had worked together before. I don't if Miss Baker remembers, but, when we were talking, I told her about how when I was in public school, my mother and my older brother and I used to get up early every morning and would go into the little cubicles in front of the basement in one those halls in the Harlem River houses, and we'd sell milk. And the milk was coming out of a co-op--not that we knew anything about what a co-op was. And we got a penny for every container of milk that we sold. And we usually bought twenty containers in a carton. And milk those days was running--the price shifted, it was either 19 or 20 or 21 cents a [container]. And if we sold two cartons, we could take home two container of milk. And the price of the milk was maybe a penny or two below what you could buy it for in the store. But the people stood in line to get that milk. If you was five minutes late, there was a whole line of people there waiting to see if they could buy some milk. And if we didn't have the right change--particularly if the milk was nineteen cents, you had to have pennies if they gave you twenty cents, which meant you had to have a bunch of pennies--we were usually in trouble, because if we didn't have the right change it might mean we couldn't sell all our milk.

Well I was telling Miss Baker about this, and of course she was on the other end of that co-op. She was one of the people who organized that co-op. So we worked together when I was in public school. I've just come to understand about co-ops, because that's the way we eat now. We live in Cambridge, and we couldn't feed our family if we weren't a member of a co-op. This particular co-op is a food co-op, and we work there two and a half hours a month in return for the privilege to shop there. And if it weren't for that co-op, we would be priced right out of the apples and oranges, forget about the dried pineapples, nuts, and things like that. So I've just begun to appreciate just what it was that Miss Baker was doing. That was a long time ago. Let's see, I was in public schools, late 1940s, and she was organizing co-ops. Now as a people we are not yet back to that. I don't know if you understand that. As a people--I'm talking about we, us--we haven't come back around to that point yet where we're willing to

get ourselves together to organize co-ops in our neighborhoods. So Miss Baker was way ahead.

Well, when we talked (I was talking to her because I was in trouble at the SCLC office; she helped me get out of that trouble; it doesn't matter what it was) what was interesting was that she had all the contacts that were needed to get out of that trouble. So she sent me off across Alabama, Mississippi and New Orleans, to all those people that she had touched bases with during all that time when she was working in the deep South. That's how I met Amzie Moore, because it was Miss Baker that gave me that name and put me in touch with Amzie Moore in Cleveland, Mississippi. And it was Amzie Moore who said, "Look, what we want to do is register all our people out here." He brought out the maps of the whole delta of Mississippi and said, "Look, we don't have a lot of lunch counters out here that we want to sit in, but we do have a lot of people around here that we want to take down to register to vote." And it was Amzie Moore who came to the SNCC meeting and sold that program to SNCC. And that was the program that later got translated into the Mississippi project and became a focal point for the civil rights movement in a number of ways during those early days of the 1960s.

Well, that would never have happened if it hadn't been for a person like Miss Baker in that SCLC office. Mind you, she wasn't working for SNCC; she was working for SCLC. She was the executive director of Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference. [Responding to comment from Baker.] No, she was there; she said, "Nominally." She says, "nominally" now. I know why she says, "Nominally," because there was all that fund-raising going on out front, and she was back there in that office. But it wasn't nominally, because she was there for a purpose and one of the purposes was the purpose that I went in there for and she helped me with. And something grew out of that, so it wasn't just nominal. So it was at that time that we touched bases. As I think of her. Since Tanzania, I began to think of her as mfundi for our movement. . . . Mfundi is a word from Swahili. And its a word that has a special meaning in Swahili language, among people who speak that language. There isn't quite a word that takes its place in the English language. You might think of a word like "expert," but that doesn't do the job, because expert carries with it a certain connotation of a person who maybe has a degree, a person who has been specially trained, comes from some school. The thing about mfundi is that mfundi is a person in a community who masters a given craft. And he masters it coming up through the community, with the help of the community, with the help of some other people in the community who have mastered it. And he plies his craft and teaches it to other people in the community. And it goes on like that, without ever being institutionalized. And I've come to think of Miss Baker as our mfundi in the

movement. That is, she mastered certain things as she grew up and became part of the movement, and she's taught us those things and there is no institutionalization of those things.

And just a couple of other things that have been very important to me and they have all been touched upon. One is the idea about leadership: the idea--its very simple--that leadership is there in the people. You don't have to worry about that. You don't have to worry about where your leaders are, how are we gonna get some leaders. The leadership is there. If you go out and work with your people, then the leadership will emerge. She taught us that early, and we saw it, so we know it's true. So we don't have to worry now. Everybody's worrying about leaders. Leaders are there. And when the movement starts again, they will emerge. We don't know who there are now; we don't need to know. But the leadership will emerge from the movement that emerges. And Miss Baker taught that to us, and taught to us the meaning and importance of having that leadership based in the movement and emerging from it and working with it as it emerges.

She also taught me--this is the last thing I'm going to talk about--about meetings. That is, she just taught me how to sit. Because we used to sit. And Miss Baker--I used to marvel, because she sat with the best of them. Still sitting. So I became initiated to meetings with Miss Baker and watching her, and then, as we went into Mississippi, we began to learn something more about meetings. I want to share just one thing we learned about them, because I came to look upon the meeting as a fundamental tool that we were using to organize. And to organize, you've got to understand your tools. And how I came to understand this was this: One day I noticed that who spoke at a meeting depended on who was speaking. And it made a difference who got up to speak, who would speak. For example, it began to dawn on me that whenever Lawrence Guyot got up to speak, Lafayette Surney got up and spoke too. I looked at that. One thing I noticed was that Lafayette Surney never got up to speak when I spoke. So I began to look at the meeting as a tool. What is it in a meeting that's there, how do you work with it, what has it got to do with releasing energy of people? Then it dawned on me that we were working with the counterpart among people to this whole revolution that took place in physics, where people have been able to release the energy in the atom. And our jobs was working with people to see how the energy of people was released--our own energies, other people's energies. I don't know the answer to it. All I know is that at some point while we were working we learned something more about a meeting and the importance of a meeting as a tool. And not how we use a meeting to teach, but how, in that meeting, the people's energies get transformed. What is that process, how does it take place?

Now, Miss Baker, I'll say one more thing, because Miss Baker said, "Where do we go?" You know, the problem with that question

is "We," who we are. Because, if you really stop to think about it, that's where we left off. We got down to that basic question. Who are we? Once we got down to that, we couldn't answer the question, "Where do we go?" Now a lot of us have been thinking about that question. This is not the place to discuss it. But that is where we are with that question. Now what we can all say—we, everybody—is that wherever we do go there are certain things that we learned that we can take with us. They have all been touched on. So Miss Baker, I would like just to say that, for myself, wherever we go, that those things that I got from you I will take with me.