

# Celebrating Ella Baker and Her “Group-Centered Leadership”

## Reading One

### Ella Josephine Baker: A Brief Biography

In recent years, groups in many different parts of the country—from North Carolina to Virginia to Maryland to New York—have lobbied local governments to commemorate a woman who was almost universally revered within the civil rights movement, but is less familiar to most Americans today: Ella Baker.

While well-known figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. deserve to be honored, the life of Ella Baker highlights a different model of leadership and gives insight into the long and patient work of building social movements. While King is justly remembered as a powerful preacher and rousing orator, a political strategist and practitioner of nonviolent direct action, Baker calls attention to a more specific role: that of the organizer.

Baker had a hand in building many of the most important organizations of the civil rights movement. She defied traditional gender roles of the time and elevated the contributions of women. She believed in deprioritizing charismatic leadership from above and instead empowering local participants to take charge of their own struggles for freedom.

To understand Ella Baker’s life and work, it is important to understand her origins. Peter Dreier, a distinguished professor of political science at Occidental College, related the beginning of Baker’s story in an article for the Huffington Post:

Born in 1903, Baker grew up in rural North Carolina not far from where her grandparents had been slaves. As a girl, Baker listened to her grandmother tell stories about slave revolts. Her mother, a former teacher and deeply religious, tutored Ella at home and coached her in public speaking. As a child, Ella was part of a supportive and tightly knit black community, where friends, relatives, and neighbors helped each other out. Her grandfather mortgaged the family farm to help feed families in need. For high school, Baker’s parents sent her to the boarding school affiliated with Shaw University. She remained at Shaw for college, edited the student newspaper, and graduated as class valedictorian in 1927.

Then she moved to Harlem. Financial hardship forced Baker to set aside her dream of getting a graduate degree in sociology. Despite her college education, her race and gender limited her job prospects, and she wound up waiting on tables and working in a factory. She began to write articles for the American West Indian News and in 1932 found a job as an editorial assistant and office manager for the Negro National News.

The suffering brought on by the Depression troubled her deeply. Harlem was a hotbed of radical activism, and Baker soon got involved in local groups working on behalf of tenants and consumers. In 1931 she organized the Young Negroes’ Cooperative League and became its national director. The group sponsored cooperative buying clubs and grocery stores both to reduce prices and to bring people together for collective action. In her next job, paid for by the

New Deal's Works Progress Administration, she organized consumer cooperatives among housing project residents. She taught adult literacy and consumer education, often with a focus on young women and housewives.

[https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ella-baker-ferguson-and-b\\_b\\_6368394](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/ella-baker-ferguson-and-b_b_6368394)

In a January 20 article for the New York Times, Barbara Ransby, historian and author of *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement*, continued Baker's story. Ransby wrote:

Baker was a field secretary and director of branches for the NAACP in the 1940s, and she traveled throughout the Jim Crow South, organizing against discrimination and recruiting people to the Civil Rights Movement. She worked alongside King and others in the Southern Christian Leadership Council in the 1950s and was a mentor to the young activists who founded the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee in 1960. SNCC went on to lead the "Freedom Rides," in which participants risked life and limb to desegregate interstate transportation....

Baker was a strategist, organizer and mother to the movement whose political acumen, humble leadership style and razor sharp political insights were legendary. It's a reflection of our selective amnesia that few people know her name.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/20/opinion/martin-luther-king-ella-baker.html>

Baker lived into the 1980s and contributed steadily to social movements for more than five decades. But perhaps one of her most significant contributions came in the spring of 1960.

That fall, young African American students had begun placing orders at segregated lunch counters and refusing to leave when they were denied service, creating a crisis for the Jim Crow order. The tactic quickly spread. Soon the sit-ins were producing hundreds of arrests, drawing national attention, and sometimes sparking enraged responses from racist onlookers.

Baker recognized the importance of absorbing the energy generated by this wave of civil disobedience. As the website *Civil Rights Women Leaders of the Carolinas* explains:

Ella organized a meeting for student activists to congregate at Shaw University, her alma mater, in the summer of 1960. She aimed to bring student groups from throughout the South together and have them accomplish more than disjointed efforts, and over 300 students attended the first meeting. From this meeting, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was born.

The creation of SNCC exemplified Ella's desire to not just lead a movement, but to create group-based leadership. As she noted, "I had always considered that my role was to facilitate" and SNCC allowed her to do just that. She trained students to fight for social activism themselves, and to travel the rural South spreading these messages of change. She acquired the nickname *Fundi* from her leadership at SNCC; a Swahili word meaning a person who masters a craft with the help of the community, practices it, then teaches it to the next generation.... SNCC continued to meet and grow.... In 1964, SNCC held the Freedom Summer, which was an effort to focus national attention on the racism in Mississippi, and to register black voters in the state.

<https://ncwomenofcivilrights.wordpress.com/ella-baker/the-sclc-and-the-birth-of-sncc/>

Also in 1964, SNCC and Baker helped organize the appearance of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic Party Convention in Atlantic City, where the group challenged the legitimacy of its state's all-white official delegation.

Ella Baker continued to mentor and directly influence dozens of activists throughout her life, especially young people. By the time of her death in 1986, she was a beloved figure, renowned for her dedication to justice and her belief in the power of everyday working people to create change.

**For Discussion:**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. What about Ella Baker's early life do you think had an impact on her future political activism?
3. Baker had an important role in mentoring young people. According to the reading, what were some examples of this focus? Why do you think she might have made this a priority?
4. SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, was a student-led organization that had a profound impact on the civil rights movement as a whole. In what ways have you seen student groups in recent years take the lead on highlighting issues of public concern?
5. What questions might you ask Ella Baker if you had the chance to talk to her? Is there more you'd like to know about her experiences?
6. What type of insights do you think Baker might have offered into today's politics?

## Reading Two

### Ella Baker's Legacy: A Different Model of Leadership

As a community organizer, Ella Baker brought a different style of leadership to the civil rights movement—one that contrasted with the traditional model that celebrated a few charismatic individuals. Baker believed in deemphasizing top organizational figureheads and instead cultivating the abilities of everyday people to collectively join together and take action. She upheld the idea that organizations should be run by those most impacted by the problems the organization is trying to solve.

In a June 12, 2015 article in Colorlines, Barbara Ransby discussed Baker's approach to leadership:

Although she objected to the top-down, predominately male leadership structures that were typical of groups like the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) and the NAACP in the 1950s and '60s, she realized the necessity for grounded, community-based leader-organizers such as sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer and Cleveland, Mississippi-based local organizer Amzie Moore. Baker was not against leadership. She was opposed to hierarchical leadership that disempowered the masses and further privileged the already privileged.

When Oprah Winfrey complained that recent protests against police violence lack leadership, she was describing [Martin Luther King's] style of leading, or at least the way in which the King legacy has been most widely branded: the reverend as the strong, all-knowing, slightly imperfect but still not-like-us type of leader.

Baker represented a different leadership tradition altogether. She combined the generic concept of leadership—“a process of social influence in which a person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task”—and a confidence in the wisdom of ordinary people to define their problems and imagine solutions. Baker helped everyday people channel and congeal their collective power to resist oppression and fight for sustainable, transformative change...

That collective effort required leaders who were accountable to one another and were not singular. There were many organizers in groups such as SNCC who modeled Baker's brand of what sociologist Charles Payne has called “group-centered leadership.”

Rather than someone with a fancy title standing at a podium speaking for or to the people, group-centered leaders are at the center of many concentric circles. They strengthen the group, forge consensus and negotiate a way forward. That kind of leadership is impactful, democratic, and, I would argue, more radical and sustainable, than the alternatives.

<https://www.colorlines.com/articles/ella-taught-me-shattering-myth-leaderless-movement>

Another way in which Baker's leadership style contrasted with the norm within many civil rights organizations was her emphasis on valuing the contributions of women. Baker was opinionated and outspoken, even when social norms held that women should be quiet and deferential. At both the SCLC

and NAACP, she protested the fact that formal power rested in the hands of men, who almost exclusively were given top offices, while women were relegated to support roles.

Congressperson John Lewis, himself a prominent civil rights activist, wrote in his memoir *Walking with the Wind*: “Long before people began using the term ‘male chauvinism,’ Ella Baker was describing it and denouncing it in the civil rights movement, and she was right. There were very, very few women getting credit for their work, and even fewer emerged into leadership positions.”

In a January 16, 2017 article for *Time* magazine, journalist Julie Scelfo notes that the prevalence of sexism, even within the movement, may be one reason that Baker is less well-known today than she might be otherwise:

Despite her level of experience and proven track record, [Martin Luther King, Jr.] had difficulty allowing a woman’s decisions to trump his own, and her idea was that the organization should devote its resources more to promoting and enabling its overall mission rather than celebrating a charismatic leader. Wyatt Tee Walker, an early SCLC board member, told the filmmaker Joanne Grant that the ministers’ refusal to follow Baker’s advice was in practice with the era’s norms. “This was before the days of women’s liberation,” he says in the 1981 film [Fund: The Story of Ella Baker...](#)

Despite Baker’s gifts for leadership and oratory, the SCLC pastors, intent on preserving their patriarchal hierarchy, refused to allow her to share in their prestige.

<https://time.com/4633460/mlk-day-ella-baker/>

Scelfo goes on to discuss another reason why Ella Baker may be less well-known and widely celebrated today than some other civil rights activists:

Baker spent years of her life performing the essential—but far from glamorous—act of listening, a crucial first step in helping beleaguered Blacks develop enough self-worth to demand being treated with dignity in an environment where they had every reason to fear brutality and economic reprisal from their white neighbors. She also understood group dynamics and how to empower people to join forces, a delicate task that involves responding to a wide array of human feelings.

A narrative about this kind of work is inherently less dramatic and far more complicated than, say, the tale of a discreet act of bravery on a bus. But great leaders have recognized for centuries that high emotional intelligence, or the ability to recognize and respond to other people’s feelings, is central to successfully influencing them.

<https://time.com/4633460/mlk-day-ella-baker/>

Baker possessed this type of intelligence and infused it into her approach to organizing. In doing so, she paved the way for many young people and women to grow in their own leadership.

Today, her legacy can be seen in organizations like Black Lives Matter, which promote a “leaderful” and feminist style of organizing. Because of this, Baker not only helped change the world, she changed how people went about changing the world.

**For Discussion:**

1. How much of the material in this reading was new to you, and how much was already familiar? Do you have any questions about what you read?
2. Did your perspective of the civil right movement change due to this reading? If so, how?
3. In what ways has sexism affected how we remember the civil rights movement? What were some ways that Ella Baker tried to intervene to highlight the work contributed by women?
4. What do you think about Ella Baker's style of leadership? What positives do you see? Are there any potential negatives you can think of? Explain your position.
5. Ella Baker believed that everyday people should be empowered to lead their own struggles against issues that directly affect them. Do you think this idea is relevant today? If so, how?
6. Think about the changes you think we need to see in this society. Do you think this change will be brought about only if great leaders emerge to make it happen?
7. Do you share some of Ella Baker's qualities, such as the ability to listen to others closely? Understand group dynamics? Encourage people to join forces? How might your talents be put to use for positive social change?