

Bayard Rustin (1912 – 1987)

Nonviolent activist for civil rights, democracy and human rights world wide

Bayard Rustin was a nonviolent activist for social change whose life spanned some three quarters of the twentieth century. Although known primarily as a leader in the African-American struggle for civil rights, Rustin also involved himself in movements against war and militarism and those which promoted democracy and human rights internationally, and with the Religious Society of Friends.

Born in 1912 in the southeastern Pennsylvania town of West Chester, Bayard Rustin was raised by his grandparents. His childhood was one of mixed, and sometime conflicting, social and religious traditions, and during his formative years he began to question ideas and customs he felt were unjust. He was introduced to nonviolent philosophy by his grandmother, Julia Davis Rustin, who was reared in a Quaker household and educated at a local Friends school. His grandfather, Janifer Rustin, was an active member of the local African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church. Young Bayard navigated both of these traditions, drawing philosophically from Quaker texts while developing his tenor voice singing at AME services. Although the town of West Chester lies north of the Mason-Dixon line (the unofficial North-South border), racial segregation was the social custom there, if not the local law. Thus Rustin attended a segregated elementary school, but an integrated high school. He participated in high school athletics, but black and white athletes were housed separately when games required overnight accommodations. Blacks and whites attended the same movie theater, but while seating was segregated, the restrooms were not. As a teenager, Rustin organized nonviolent protests to challenge these practices of segregation.

Following high school Rustin attended both Wilberforce and Cheyney Universities, but left without earning a degree. Instead, he moved to New York where he plunged himself into the social and political movements that thrived during the pre-World War II years. He attended classes at City College, a hot bed of political activism, where he further developed his political and personal identities. After a brief flirtation with the Young Communist League, he aligned himself with Democratic Socialist Norman Thomas, labor leader A. Philip Randolph, and pacifist minister A.J.

Muste, all of whom contributed greatly to his philosophical development and nurtured his innate organizing talents. At the same time, Rustin's identity as a young gay man was being shaped in the liberal, somewhat accepting atmosphere of Harlem in the late 1930s. All of these factors combined to produce a charismatic figure capable of stirring a crowd with a thoughtful address and then inspiring them to participate in a demonstration that he had carefully orchestrated.

During the 1940s, Bayard Rustin worked with the American Friends Service Committee and, as a staff member for the Fellowship of Reconciliation, toured the country speaking on the subjects of race relations, war and peace, and criminal justice policies. In 1948 he delivered the William Penn Lecture entitled "In Apprehension How Like a God!" which addressed the issue of disarmament. In the early 1950s he was an active member of Fifteenth Street Monthly Meeting in New York, serving on both the Prison and Race Relations Committees. Having spent three years in federal prison as a conscientious objector, where he organized protests against racially segregated practices, Rustin was well qualified to advise Quaker involvement in these concerns. He was a key participant in the drafting of the 1955 landmark Quaker pamphlet "Speak Truth to Power," although his name was omitted, at his request, from the list of contributors due to a 1953 arrest on a morals charge. Rustin felt that his name on the work would provide a tool for those wishing to distract attention from the important message therein.

The beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955 ushered in a period of intense mass action for African-American equality and civil rights. Bayard Rustin's extensive knowledge of nonviolent strategies and tactics, combined with the leadership skills developed under Thomas, Randolph, and Muste, positioned him for a major role in the struggle. He was dispatched to Montgomery when Randolph's colleague from the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, E.D. Nixon, a leading local activist, sought assistance in sustaining the boycott. Rustin quickly became a valued advisor to Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.

Over the next 14 years, Rustin was responsible for organizing some of the most important demonstrations for civil rights, including the 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom and the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, often referred to as the high point of struggle. He

drafted articles and speeches for Dr. King and drew up the outline that was the foundation for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Rustin’s gay identity and radical political background sometimes led to his marginalization within the movement, and relegated him to work behind the scenes. The success of the 1963 March brought him into the public eye and shortly thereafter he co-founded the A. Philip Randolph Institute which provided him a platform for promoting the vision of a racially integrated society responsive to human needs and fashioned upon principles of democratic socialism. He worked closely with labor, religious, and political groups to forge a coalition that would work toward these ends.

The successful passage of civil rights legislation later followed by Dr. King’s assassination led to shift in the focus of the movement. As Rustin had predicted in his important article, “From Protest to Politics,” African Americans broadened their political involvement and turned their attention to achieving access to education, jobs, and health care—the fundamentals to achieving economic and social equality. While maintaining a senior role in the civil rights leadership, Rustin too broadened his concerns and devoted more time to his interest in international human rights and democracy. He worked on behalf of political dissidents, whether individuals or groups, and traveled extensively with the International Rescue Committee supporting their work with refugees fleeing war and political unrest.

Although not an active Friend during his later years, Rustin maintained ties with the Quaker community, speaking at Friends schools and monthly meetings. He was awarded an honorary degree by Haverford College in 1985. He died in 1987. In 1995 a historical marker in his honor was erected in West Chester, PA.

Resources on Bayard Rustin:

Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement, By Daniel Levine, Rutgers University Press, 1999

Bayard Rustin: Troubles I’ve Seen, By Jervis Anderson, University of California Press, 1998

[“Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin”](#) (documentary film)

Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin, By John D’Emilio, University of Chicago Press, 2004

No Easy Answers: Bayard Rustin and the Civil Rights Movement, By Calvin Craig Miller, Morgan Reynolds Publishing, 2005

Time on Two Crosses: The Collected Writings of Bayard Rustin, Edited by Devon, Carbado and Donald Weise, Cleis Press, 2003

“In Apprehension How Like a God!”, 1948 William Penn Lecture, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting

About the Author(s)

Walter Naegle was Bayard Rustin's partner for the last decade of Rustin's life. He worked and traveled extensively with him, and co-authored with Rustin and Charles Bloomstein, "South Africa: Is Peaceful Change Possible?" a pamphlet published in 1984 by the New York Friends Group. He has served on the Executive Committee of the NY Metropolitan Region of the AFSC, and was Executor of Mr. Rustin's estate.

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