

UNDERSTANDING THE MAN

INTERVIEW THREAD TWO: AS A LEADER

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

"Oh, yes. He was always accessible. And I think that most of the times that I saw him, he was depressed, didn't know what the world was going to do next. But he was always accessible, and I think I went to meet him right after that, said I wanted to come see him, he said, "Come see me," and — and he — I loved him because he was one of those adults who didn't feel he had to have all the answers, who could listen, who didn't feel ashamed to say, 'I don't know what the next step's gonna be.' And I guess most of the conver — many of the conversations I had was when he was struggling like we were struggling, for the next steps. He was not somebody who was chosen to lead— who chose to lead, I think he was chosen by [civil rights activist] Jo Ann Robinson and the people — and the women — and the ordinary people of Montgomery. He was new in the block, new kid on the block, didn't have a whole lot of baggage, and they needed a spokesperson, and so Jo Ann Robinson picked this new minister at Dexter, thank God. And the rest is history. But he was always humble, he was always accessible, he was always struggling.

"And that gave you confidence that you didn't know all the answers. And I know we used to laugh a lot about how terrified we both were of police dogs, what it felt when he was in that car going down after one of his arrests at Rich's. And the isolation. I will cross a block to get away from a police dog since I first met them in Greenwood, Mississippi. But he, he was able to laugh, but to talk about fear, but to say you don't let it paralyze you. And that was always reinforcing, I think, for young people struggling to find solutions to life's questions."

MARY LOU FINLEY

"Sometimes we had staff meetings in Doctor King's apartment, and we could barely fit in there. There would be, like, 20 young people all sitting on the floor, kind of crammed together like when you go to a young people's party and you have to, like, walk over everybody to get anywhere. It was kind of like that. But we liked being there in the evenings. It was better than being in a cold church late at night when we need to have meetings. So, one time we were having a meeting there with Doctor King and trying to figure out, you know, what we were going to do next and how we were going to solve some of the problems we were running up against in the organizing efforts. And finally, Doctor King said he was tired and he was going to go to bed, so he left and went into the other room to go to bed in this apartment. And we kept talking. We're meeting, and we got into some kind of wrangle that we can't quite remember exactly what it was about, but we had a lot of disagreements. So, we had a major disagreement that we couldn't really resolve. Somebody said, 'We have to go get Doctor King.' So, somebody went and got him out of bed, and he came out in his pajamas and his robe, and he sat down with us.

"And Doctor King was very good at listening to people, listening to this side and then listening to that side, and then trying to figure out how to make something work that would deal with the issues that all the different people in the group were raising. He was excellent at that. And he really came up with some kind of conclusion that we could all work with and go forward with. And I have to say also that there was a huge amount of respect for Doctor King. And so, you know, if he said, 'This is the way to go,' people would say, 'Okay. That's what we're going to do.' So that was another element in the whole thing. But his capacity to listen carefully and to actually integrate other people's ideas was one of his real strengths that I think people who know him mostly from his speeches wouldn't necessarily guess. But part of the reason all that was so powerful was that he had been listening a lot, and he knew from what he had heard what the issues were in the community."

CLEVELAND SELLERS

“You know, he, when he got his Nobel Peace Prize, an award came with it, it was something like — I think it was \$50,000 or something like that, big money in that day when he got it and he gave some to SCLC and some to other civil rights organizations, but he didn’t, he didn’t keep any money for himself. And I thought that that was, that was testimonial to an old belief in the African American community that you don’t try to benefit in terms of enriching yourself, what you try to do is you try to enrich the community in whatever way you can, and he stuck to that principle.”

RICHARD FERNANDEZ

“...he welcomed me, ‘Hi, Dick,’ he said. You know, I’m a naïve, you know, college student, innocent in more ways than I’d like to admit. And we walked in and we sat down. I had my little yellow pad with my 15 questions. I had my pen out, and he proceeded for 15 minutes to interview me. ‘What brought you down to Montgomery? Why were you interested in the aftermath? What did you find out in Montgomery? What are you going to do when you get out of college? What are you interested in?’ So, we had this conversation, and I’m thinking, ‘Am I going to get to my questions?’ But his interest in me just, again, took me back, and always in this very quiet tone.

“So, I got into my questions and I wish I had kept that term paper; I don’t know where it went. But during the course of the conversation I used the expression ‘white trash,’ probably a couple of times. And three or four minutes after I’d used it the second time, Doctor King said to me, he said, ‘You know, Dick, when we use words like ‘white trash’ it’s a way of objectifying those who we are not getting along with at the moment. And the more we do that, it creates more distance between us rather than less. And we’ll never get much way along the road if we objectify people.’ The fact that he included himself in that sentence, ‘when we,’ you know, here’s this head of the Civil Rights Movement. He didn’t have to do that, that he included himself. I asked him about the fact that the buses of Atlanta had been integrated for three years, and African-Americans were still at the back, the whites were still at the front. And he said, ‘Well you know, Dick, the people in Atlanta are like people everywhere. Change is not the thing they like to do the most.’ And he said, ‘If you come back in three more years, about three more years, the buses will be fully integrated. People will be...’ And he said it takes time for black and whites together to feel comfortable, but he said it will come because now they have the right to sit anywhere.

“So, I left that interview knowing — not knowing at the time how much it changed my life. But I have never forgotten those lessons of including others and making sure that you identify yourself as part of the problem, because we always are part of the problem. So, that was my interview with Doctor King in Atlanta.”