

THE MYLES HORTON READER

Education for Social Change



Edited by Dale Jacobs

Ideas That Have Withstood the Test of Time

[1986]

This interview was conducted by Gary J. Conti and Robert A. Fellenz and originally appeared in the journal Adult Literacy and Basic Education in 1986 under the title "Myles Horton: Ideas That Have Withstood the Test of Time." This interview, while rather far ranging, focuses mainly on the core ideas that make Highlander what it is. As Conti and Fellenz put it in the abstract that originally appeared with this interview, "This record of an informal conversation with Horton contains a discussion of his views on many topics such as current social issues, staffing at Highlander, the role of trust and experience in the educational process, Paulo Freire and Saul Alinsky, teaching methods, and sensing social change."

GARY J. CONTI AND ROBERT A. FELLEENZ: With what kind of issues are you now dealing?

MYLES HORTON: We have been doing a lot on toxics lately because that is the problem that fits the responses and needs of the people as they feel those needs, as they perceive them, and not as we perceive them. We try to see what their perceptions are and how we can latch onto that. So whatever the people are struggling with, that seems to be the flow at Highlander.

CONTI AND FELLEENZ: Can you give an example of such a project?

HORTON: Probably the most successful project in terms of organization is at Middlesburg, Kentucky, which is across the line up here.⁶⁴ Those people started fighting the tannery that dumped its waste in Yellow Creek. This polluted the area water supply that they used to water their stock, they swam in, and they washed their clothes in. They started fighting that. They were kind of country folks, miners and ex-miners. They all live in Yellow Creek about fifteen to twenty miles outside city limits. They did not have much clout, but they stuck together. They finally started coming into the city, picketing, and taking over the city council meeting. They came in and sat there for a week. They did things like that to build up their strength.

These are not voters in the city; they are people who live out on Yellow Creek, but they have organized the people in town. They told them this is your problem too. They parlayed this into a political organization. Unlike most people who get into politics who have to run somebody to get in and represent them, they are too smart for this. They have been in mines and organizations. They know you don't have a token person in some place [and then] you have power. So the first time they ran, they ran five people. They asked people to vote for all of them. They said, "It won't help to just vote for me. But if you vote for all five of us, we'll have enough to do something." They had that kind of savvy that a lot of people don't have. Darn if they didn't win all five of the council seats. Last time they won three more. Now they have eight. They want complete control because there are some things that the mayor can veto if the vote is not unanimous.

But there are some things that they are able to do. The person who fought them the hardest was the lawyer for the city, and he just made his living fighting these people down the creek. They didn't have the power to hire or fire him, but they fixed salaries. So they cut his salary down from \$75,000 per year to \$50 per month. They can't fire him but they can say how much he can make. They don't quite have control, but they are really throwing their weight around now.

CONTI AND FELLEZZ: How did Highlander get involved in helping the people of Yellow Creek?

HORTON: Ed, who had been at Highlander several years ago, helped organize the people in Yellow Creek.⁶⁵ They were having all kinds of trouble. So Ed brought four or five people down here. We started working with them, working out ideas, and putting them in contact with people. We got people to go up and take some pictures, but mainly it was getting them to think about how you build an organization. It's more than just a short-range, single-purpose reform organization. Most organizations are based on the theory that people are so stupid that they have to win everything or the people will lose interest. That's more the mentality of

organizers than it is of the rank and file. They think that the people are a reflection of them, but that is not true at all. They are much more cautious and less imaginative than the people. We tried to get the people to use their own resources and to do their own thinking.

They really have done a terrific job of running their organization. They have financed it completely themselves. They pay dues to themselves. They do a tremendous job. Right now they need some legal help because they have gone as far as they can in terms of protesting political actions in the South. It's out of their hands. They had to do something to get the company to deal with them. They had kept control in their hands. They agree with Highlander that they are their own experts and don't want anyone else to do their thinking. But the company has lawyers so we need lawyers that know how to deal with them. But the lawyers think we don't know anything even though we pay them. We want to be in a position to give them the information we have and make the lawyers use that. In this way, we can keep control of the situation.

We have a person, John, who is very good at research and knows how to use computers.⁶⁶ The people from Yellow Creek came down, and they said, "We have all of this information, but it is just stacked up in people's barns and everything. We don't know how to use it." John suggested that the only way that they could keep up with all of this information was to put it on a computer. They knew that the lawyer was going to call down and ask for information on this subject or that. Even after you run around and get it, it's too late. John went up and worked with them for a few days. They set up a program where everybody is getting their stuff and where they are coding it themselves. They have all the facts—thousands of items by date on this computer now. Press a button and they have it. It forced them to get all of their stuff together and reevaluate what they have. They are probably the most sophisticated bunch of creek people in all of Appalachia. They know what they know, and they know how to get what they know. That is a pretty sophisticated example. John suggested the computer because they wouldn't have known it was possible. But they did the work. He did not do any of the work.

CONTI AND FELLEENZ: How do you go about identifying the staff for Highlander? Do they come to you?

HORTON: That's right. Basically that is what happened once we got started. The board and staff has functioned the same since 1935. People start working with Highlander. They might come as a visitor or to a workshop. They keep coming back. Or they might be working with an organization. Or they might be involved in a student program. One got involved in a Vanderbilt program to help people set up community controlled clinics. Through that he got interested in the mountain area. In working with the Vanderbilt group, he had a relationship with Highlander and found that they overlapped. After he got a Fulbright, went to

Oxford, and wrote a dissertation that won lots of awards, he came back. He had been Vanderbilt's student representative on the board. Others had thought that he would come back and get a job at Vanderbilt. But John had a mind of his own; he had an idea of what he wanted to do with his research. He wanted to do what is now labeled "participatory research." At that time it did not have a name—it existed without a name. It existed at Highlander all along. So it is now named. He wanted not to do research for people but rather to empower people to do their own research. Then they would not have to depend on [a] researcher because that is manipulative. The researcher can take knowledge away from people and give it to someone else to use against them.

CONTI AND FELLEENZ: Many of Highlander's staff members are very talented individuals. What motivates them to remain a part of the staff?

HORTON: Most are here because they are interested in a certain thing that Highlander gives them a chance to do. They bring a lot to Highlander in terms of ideas. They think of Highlander as a base in which they will have the freedom to operate. So you have little principalities—cultural research, working toxics, music. It used to be labor and civil rights; now it is political action. Each has a little area where they can try their wings. Others respect them because that is not their area. They each have their own thing. It gives them a lot of freedom, and at the same time they have the support of everybody. You get backing from others because they want you to back them in what they are doing. It is a mutual kind of support. But it is not run from the top. It is not someone telling you what to do and them getting a staff person to do a preconceived program.

Everyone comes to Highlander to do a new program. That keeps it alive. They do it in the Highlander way with the Highlander ideas of participation and democracy; the Highlander ideas of giving power to the people; the Highlander ideas of making people their own experts; and the Highlander ideas of basing it on their own interests. They come because they think it is a good way to work because it has been working for fifty years. They think, "Hell—maybe my something will work." Somebody like John has made participatory research as kosher a Highlander approach to education as you can have. That is why he came here—because he liked that idea. We didn't have a program. He made the program; he fits it in.

All the people at Highlander appreciate the Highlander history. They are proud of it and are proud to be a part of it. They want to extend it and contribute to it. So it is part a brand new something and part something old. It's that combination that makes it work. So that is how people come.

CONTI AND FELLEENZ: Is Highlander a center which people come to, or do the Highlander staff members go out and do the training?

HORTON: Well, we don't so much do the workshops away from here. The last one we did was in Mississippi. We had deep-South people from Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama at a four-day culture workshop. When I say culture, we are talking about politics, economic struggles, civil rights, and international problems. But that is not the usual pattern even though there might be a half dozen things like that a year. What we mean primarily by field-work extension or getting out in the field is visiting with former students, who have started programs, who need help. Highlander does not go out and do things. Our policy is to find people who have already begun to provide some social leadership and to bring them here. Our contribution is to help them because they are already there. They have their roots. Now if they say they need some help to do what they want to do (what we decided that we want to do and what they had decided to do before they contacted Highlander), we would have someone come down and take a look and see if there is anything we can do. So that is the relationship that we have. It's following up on the people who have been to Highlander. That way we know the field. That is extremely important at Highlander because a high percentage of what success we have at Highlander is due to the selectivity of the people we work with. We work with those people in a situation that we think has some social potential, a potential for some structural changes more than just little reforms—fundamental change. We work with those people, have them go back to where they are from, and continue to be supportive of them. To do this you have to know something of the community; you have to know about the area that you are going to be working in, or you wouldn't know how to select people. It is particularly true since the flashy people, the ones who look good, are seldom worth working with. So the kind of people that most people know about, that most people relate to, that most foundations give money to, and that most organizations work with are the ones that we don't work with. We found that they are mostly conservative. They know how to be glib, they know how to write proposals, they know how to get publicity, but they don't know how to work with the people. So you get a little bureaucracy set up that is very glib and scintillating; it looks very good, but it doesn't have any roots. If we see something that is shiny and looks good, we all take a real hard look at it. That's a no-no for us; we look behind it.

CONTI AND FELLEZZ: Yes, that is fine to go out to people, but how do you find out what they are really thinking?

HORTON: To do this we have to be out in the field and talk and listen to people. Listening to them is important. You see people generally have a preconception of what they are looking for. So they look around until they find someone to fit that preconception, and the glib will know that game. What we try to do is to find out what the grassroots people's perceptions are. We ask what their perceptions are of themselves and their

situation and not what our perceptions are. To do this, you have to get out and talk to them, to get out and live with them, and to ask them question[s]. Look around—see if they are telling you the truth; check with someone else; dig in. You have to know people to get in a community at this level. You can't go into anybody's community on that level unless you know someone. You have to have a door-opener for you; you need someone that vouches for you. Otherwise you stay on the surface.

So we try to cultivate where we have students, and by now we have thousands of them scattered around. There is usually someone around who knows Highlander, knows who we are, and gets us an introduction. Highlander is a good password in most of the rural areas of the South. People may not know all the ideas, but when they mention Highlander, it is as something good. They know that somebody in the labor movement or in the civil rights movement has been to Highlander. So they say it must be ok. That is why it is so important to get out into the field. Who comes is important because they are going to do whatever is done. We can only strengthen them, and maybe we can enlarge their vision, encourage them, or help them learn how to analyze.

CONTI AND FELLEZ: A lot has been written about what goes on at Highlander, but what do you think is the most important thing you do for people?

HORTON: Probably the most important thing that we do for people is to have them participate in an actual democratic experience—a ripe experience where people are free to talk and make decisions, where there is no discrimination, and where their experience is valued. If you don't value a person's experiences, I don't know how you can value them as a person. Poor people know that; sometimes academicians don't know that, but poor people do. When you value their experiences, then they recognize that you respect them. That attitude and atmosphere is as important as any other thing. It is an extension of the idea of helping people value their own experiences so they can be something to learn from. An unexamined experience is just a happening; it is just something you know. Experiences don't educate, but you can tear experiences apart and try to figure out all that is in there. Then it becomes the best educational experience, and it's their experience. It is rooted in them. If you can get them to value their peers' experiences, then this can be extended to their peers, their past, and other countries. People don't understand that when you get people appreciating themselves and their peers in Hardin County, then they can appreciate what is going on in Nicaragua and South Africa because those are poor working people too. It is an extension of their experiences. It is not something that is happening to poor people in a different part of the country. You can talk to them about their peers and their past. So it is not a limiting concept; it is a liberating concept! But it is basic. When you do that with people, they have something

they can take back with them. They can do that when they get home. They can go back and do the same thing. When they leave Highlander, they do not need to come back for another shot later on. They take the ideas with them.

CONTI AND FELLEENZ: How important are the physical arrangements for the educational setting?

HORTON: What we have always done, I got from the Indians. They always sit around in circles so that there is nothing hierarchical. They did have a chief, but he was on the same level. What I always tried to do was to break the hierarchical situation so that everyone was a part of the learning circle. If we are part of the same circle, we are all learning. Our experiences may be different, but we all are learning. It was just a way of having everyone equal, and so they could see each other. The comfort is in the rocking chairs we use.

Physical is important: sleeping together, having people together, having people eat together, and having people talk together. Togetherness is important. The residentialness of it is important. You couldn't go to a hotel and have a Highlander workshop. You couldn't go to a college and have a Highlander workshop. You couldn't go to a place where you have a big building with several other groups meeting and where you meet in one corner. It has to be contained, unified, concentrated to get the sense of the people who are there. We get them physically away from their everyday life so they can begin to think about something that is terribly important. Actually, our staff a month ago rented a place in North Carolina and went over there to have a residential staff meeting. Here they can't get away from the phone; here they can't get away from the baby or whatever; they have their jobs here. To have a residential workshop, our staff has to get away from here. It's really very important if you are going to concentrate.

CONTI AND FELLEENZ: How important is documenting with pictures what goes on at Highlander?

HORTON: We do a lot of this. In the early days at Highlander, we started working with labor unions getting the people to tell their stories. Many of them couldn't write at that time. We would get them to write the little stories of their lives and how they got interested in the union movement. Since we didn't have any recording machines there, those who could not write would dictate to somebody. We would write it down and read it to them. We would put out books of people telling their stories. We would just keep collecting that information. We always felt that anything you can get people to say about themselves is meaningful. It also shows that you honor and respect them by putting it down and keeping it. Now that was a very simple thing compared to what has happened now as we get more sophisticated [with] the kind of equipment we have today. We are able to do videotapes of this timeframe and world histories. There are all

kinds of angles to that. We have hundreds of hours of videotapes and interviews, and then we have movies based on interviews. We have a book based on interviews.⁶⁷

We do a tremendous amount of oral history, but we are doing more of it now because of the resources. It has to do with the same thing I talked about earlier—the perceptions. You have to ask people what their perceptions are before you can find out. You can't guess at it. If you ask people to tell you their story, you're getting their perception of things. It is an extension of this idea that if you want to know what people think, you have to ask them. We are getting back to what we did in the early days at Highlander; we are getting the ordinary rank-and-file people telling their stories. We don't get many named people here. Some of them later become named people, but when they came here, they weren't named people—just people. Somebody said that for our fiftieth anniversary that we needed to get a big speaker like when we got Martin Luther King on our twenty-fifth anniversary. I said you wouldn't have much trouble getting as big a speaker as he was now. He wasn't a big speaker at the time we got him. We didn't have any trouble getting him. He was delighted. He was just getting known out of the South.

CONTI AND FELLEZZ: How did you get a feel for the culture, the music, and the heart of the people that has become such a part of Highlander?

HORTON: If you grew up poor like I did in the mountains and the rural South, you tend to think of the totality of things that make up life. Everybody struggled to make a living. Most people in my culture went to church; there wasn't much else to do. When I was growing up there were only two places that kids could meet people, school or church. Activities had to do with either of these. If you weren't in school or church, then you didn't have any social life. So it wasn't a matter of making some decision about this. It is like having some food on the table, you don't make a decision about if you're going to eat it. You just eat it. The church is there, and the school is there. You don't make a decision particularly, you just do it. So I grew up thinking of those things being integral—all part of life. The singing, the square dancing, and the fights—all were part of life. It wasn't as segmented as in more civilized or advanced society. So I always thought more holistically. Culture is what I always thought was the underlying category that took everything that was not pulled out and called education, or religion, or what. It is the base. The other things you pull out so that you can look at them, but they are like a rubber band that slips back down in there. You pull them out to look at them, but to me they were all part of the same ball of wax. It was the culture that tied them all together. I never thought of culture as being limited to the fine arts although they are part of culture.

Music was a part of everything. Music was always a very important part of things. In my life pictures, not art but pictures such as calendars

or any kinds of picture, were important. They enriched life. A picture was something important. I'm not saying that I like now the things that I liked then; I don't. But then it had a meaning. I like poetry for reasons that I don't know. Poetry was always important to me. I don't want to leave any of those things out. That's why I want to include them at Highlander. Without culture in its broader sense, you have a tendency to make intellectualization a bloodless kind of exercise. It becomes a kind of a gymnastic exercise. It has very little to do with life. You have to keep it tied in with the cultural side to have meaning. The intellectual part should serve the cultural; not the cultural serve the intellectual. The culture is a totality.

CONTI AND FELLEZZ: How is success judged at Highlander? Who decides if things are going well?

HORTON: We all have to have someone who judges us. If you are at a college, it is by your peers. At Highlander it's the people you work with who decide if you are doing a good job and if you are effective. You need to learn to be valued by the people you work with. Success at Highlander is not what your peers think but rather what the people we work with think. Success is if they want you to come back. Our judges are the people we work with because if they stop coming to Highlander and stop supporting our program, we can get all the money in the world, all the acclaim, and all the awards, but we'll just be sitting up here doing nothing. Just looking at a beautiful sunset. If you want to work, you have to have people to work with. It is terribly important that the people we work with find us useful. So that's who you should be judged by.

It's always more fun to be judged by the people you are trying to work with because that is why you did it. People in education are not in it to get rich. Yet we don't have the opportunity to be judged for the very reason that we got into education. There is something wrong with that system. Those most concerned about the school system are educators. Yet we can't get the privilege of being judged by those we are trying to serve.

CONTI AND FELLEZZ: It seems that many are frightened by change. Are they afraid to seek solutions to today's problems?

HORTON: The old pressures are for a person to accept the preconceived path that others have laid out for them, and that is what schooling is pretty much about. It's comforting if you don't want to make up your own mind. We go through that system without thinking about it because it is socially approved system and we might be unhappy with it if we examined it. But it is an extension of the family; you have a little nest. It's a little bigger nest, but you can fit into it. Your peers all agree with you, and there is a little comfort there. The trouble there is that when you get out of it and get certified as being educated, you no longer have a nest. What you do then is join a nest that someone else makes for you. You fit into whatever society tells you to do. People who are unhappy have not

stopped to think that they have been nesting all their lives and have been afraid to try their wings. They have never been allowed to test their experiences because that was a no-no. Other people know what is good for you, and the whole educational and societal system is to fit you into that pattern. You are never supposed to know from your experience if that is good or bad. When you start doing that, you are bucking a lifetime of conditioning.

CONTI AND FELLEZZ: The questions are usually more interesting and important than the answers. Are they not?

HORTON: Yes, that is absolutely right. You see the answer is not really important. Answers get back to someone saying that this is the right thing. This is the authoritative answer. This is what is right. Answers are tricky. I don't care much for answers. People at Highlander will never tell you what to do. I don't tell them what to do because I don't know what to tell them, and I'm not about to lie to them. They want you to pretend that you know. They come here for answers like they go someplace else for answers, but you are letting them down if you give them answers. Most of those people who give those answers know less than I do, but they are very glib at giving people answers. The tragedy is that this is what people want, and they will take them even if they don't fit. Giving answers is not as good a way of education as asking questions and making people face up and think through things for themselves.

When you can get people to think about the process that they are going through, this is the beginning of their education. They don't have to have a classroom, a teacher, or book of instructions to do that. They just do it wherever they are. When you get people to value their own experience and learn how to learn from and do thinking for themselves, they can practice in the toilet, in their walking, in the car, or anywhere. It is the best system that I could ever come up with—giving people practice in educational processes. It is a process. That is what education is about. Educators come to Highlander and ask what is your method; what is your technique; what is your gimmick? They believe that you have to have a gimmick. We had a very important person in Esau Jenkins, who worked in the Sea Islands.⁶⁸ People would come up to him and say, "What is your root?" Like a rabbit foot, they thought that he had gotten the right charm. What's your root; what's your gimmick; what's your magic. That is exactly what they are asking when they ask about our method and techniques. To get people to understand that education is a process and that whatever method or technique seems best in that given situation is the best one to use. This is better than a method that you clamp onto every situation and force people into it like you are torturing them. If they are not long enough, stretch them; if they are too long, cramp them up so they will fit your methods! Deform them anyway you can so they fit your methods. I was on a panel with Paulo Freire at

the Riverside Church recently in New York.⁶⁹ The topic was methods; what's the best method for education. I thought, my God, this is going to be short! The moderator introduced the subject and asked me first. I said I can answer that rather briefly. "The best method is the method that works best by the person in a given situation." I didn't say anything else. Then he asked Paulo. He said in very erudite academic terms exactly the same thing. The third person on the panel said, "It looks like neither of these people are going to talk about it, so I will talk about it." Well, I thought that I had talked about it. I had said all there was to be said. The reason the moderator asked that question was that he had worked with both of us before and he knew that most people think that Freire has a gimmick. Most people reduce him to a gimmicker. Of course, he has been fighting that all of this life. He just wanted to give him a chance to say, "I don't have any gimmicks."

CONTI AND FELLEZZ: How do you compare what you try to do at Highlander in this cultural setting with what Freire is trying to do in his?

HORTON: Freire and I have talked several times, and we have talked a little about this. He is at a great disadvantage. While we have had fifty years to experiment and work in the same place, he was put in jail after a couple of years, exiled, and never allowed to get back in the rural areas. He has never had the opportunity that we have had to be in one place and to work it out. He is extremely aware of that and unhappy about it. He would have liked to do the same thing. Instead he is forced to go to Harvard, forced to go to Geneva, and forced to work in a country that he didn't know anything about. He has had a terribly disadvantaged opportunity to do things. I would think that we would do pretty much the same thing if we had the same circumstances because of our thinking. He has a kind of liberation theology which is a type of Marxist social gospel.⁷⁰ He is a Christian socialist.⁷¹ I've always been religious; I've tried to do a Marxist analysis. So the goals that we believe in are quite similar. He didn't have time before he was put in jail, and the situation that he thought was developing didn't develop. He never had time to test out ideas like we did so he has to theorize about them more. He has to do it more academically because he had less opportunities to experiment. That does not mean that one is better or worse than the other. It just means that it is of describing what he is thinking and what we are presented in different language.

Freire never had what they called a kind of democratic opening that he thought was taking place at the time he was teaching the peasants in Brazil to read and write so that they could organize and do something. It turned out not to be an opening at all. They put him in jail. But here with all the weaknesses of this country, we have opportunities that make Highlander possible. They have tried to put us out of business, but they didn't succeed. People ask why should I say that the United States has

HORTON: The reason the workshops at Highlander work is that you have to trust the people, you have to love the people, and you have to care for people. You have to practice what you preach with people. That is the methodology. That puts the finger on the reason why we cannot be imitated by the oppressor very effectively. How people learn is a miracle. I don't understand how it takes place. I have seen people change scores of time and I have seen those people change scores of people. The multiplication of this is the thing. I can do it but really don't understand what happens. I have known Klansman who come to Highlander. They say, "I will eat with these niggers, but I want you to know that I am a Klansman." I have had them leave changed, and they are still changed today. By changed I mean they were going in this direction and now they are going in this direction. Now they haven't gone very far, but they have all their life in the other direction. I have not been concerned with how far but rather in the direction. I have seen that happen, I know it has happened. I knew at the time it was happening but was in awe of how it happened and why it happened. Yet it was happening. To make it happen is easier than to understand it. Human beings are so darn sensitive and complicated. There is still that great mystery there.

CONTI AND FELLEENZ: How do you get your sense of what the important social issues are going to be?

HORTON: There is [a] combination of things. I talk to the people and get a feel of it—their unspoken sense of it. Before we started the Citizenship School program, I went down to the Sea Islands and stayed with Esau. It was all a blur. Yet I was determined to find a way to help Esau because it was a real problem. If you are going to have a democracy, people have a right to vote. If they are required to read and write to vote, then you are going to have to teach them to read and write so they can vote. That is aside from being interested in education for education's sake. It is kind of a moral imperative to me. But I couldn't figure it out. I stayed off and on for a couple of months and talked to the people out in the rice fields, watched them fish, went out and helped them with the work, got out to visit, and went to their churches. Gradually, I got to understand them. They got used to me because I was a friend of Esau. I finally got the sense of people. Then I saw why it is that they didn't want to read and write. My first understanding was that they never had a need to read and write to vote because they never had anyone to vote for and never thought that made any difference. Esau ran for office to give black people a person to vote for. That heighten[ed] their image. That made sense to me, so I could now see the motivation. Lots of people learn to read and write because it's a good thing, but that didn't work. So I thought that well maybe there is no opportunity. But there [was] unspent money for teachers for literacy, and there were teachers who

had not had a student for two or three years. I had to find out why. I started to try to analyze the situation and came up with this whole bit of dignity. They didn't treat them with respect; they didn't treat them with dignity. They treated them like little kids. They were contemptuous of them. They actually put them in seats for children; they called them daddy longlegs, these big old lanky people sitting in a chair for first graders. They just treated them like dirt. So that became obvious that you have to treat people with respect. The reverse of this might mean success: How could I design a program to treat them with respect and to cash in on the fact that they were beginning to be interested in politics but that they couldn't vote because of the laws that said you had to read and write? It was a law which was designed to keep them from voting. I finally put it together. I got a cultural feel. That is very important. How can you tie into that?

What I am trying to say is that I don't sit down and try to figure the thing out in my head. I try to get in and get a sense of it. Now I use the same kind of sensing and feeling about the other problems. Are people ready to move on something, or have they gotten their head beat in every time they tried to move? When preachers started to try to agitate back in slavery days, they made it illegal for them to preach. They put all the blacks in the backs of the white churches where they could keep an eye on them and wouldn't let them have their own churches. Now they have their own churches. What is the significance that they have them? Is this something new? Then I began to realize that the churches are the whole basis of the black community. It was the religious life with all of the singing. Down there they had all the stomping with the shout. Those are the guts of the people. Then I used to go out on the farm where the people worked, and where there was the "man." I saw that they couldn't watch the scales; they couldn't figure anything, they knew they were being gypped. I was beginning to see some of the conflict situations and to see some of the points where you could stir them up, get them angry, and get them to see the injustices. You have to find points of injustice that people will recognize as injustice. Finally, I began to think that I must begin to think like they must think. How do these people think? I tried to put myself as far as I could in their situation. I parlayed that kind of being sensitive to what is the climate everywhere. I felt that uneasiness. I supposed that people could be moved because I had experience in organizing people. I helped the CIO (Congress of Industrial Organizations)⁷² organize the first textile workers in the South. I know how people work. I had that experience from before from the mountains and the coal mines. We organized 80 percent of the unemployed in our county. We elected our people to every office in the county on an independent political ticket back in the '50s. So I had some experience working

with masses of people. I knew a little bit about how they moved or how they could move if you got the grassroots leaders going. Using education as a means instead of organizing them is a big difference. Through some of my contacts and because of Highlander's history, I had access to information that most people did not have. Then I had contact with the bottom and most people didn't have. So I had two avenues of information that most people didn't have.

CONTI AND FELLEENZ: Did you know Saul Alinsky?⁷³ What do you have in common with him?

HORTON: Yes, very well. I knew Saul when he was working in the prisons. We were good friends for many, many years. We were good personal friends.

I think you use organizations to educate people and use them consciously. I am less concerned about whether you win in your goal. If you don't educate people regardless of how many little victories you have, nothing is ever going to happen. To me organizations are for the primary purpose of educating people because most of them do not bring about any kind of changes that are significant anyway. So you might as well use them for something worthwhile. That is my line. Saul takes the line that the organization itself educates. The mere fact of organization educates. It's a fine line. I remember one time we were supposed to be debating. Saul said, "Myles has never been able to explain Highlander. Let me explain it!" So he did. He did a better job of explaining Highlander than I did. He was a staunch supporter of Highlander and helped us raise a tremendous amount of money. He used to be a fund-raising rabble-rousing speaker of Chicago. Saul and I worked differently, but basically we had the same ideas. We were always posed as being different, but I had no trouble doing it his way and him my way.

CONTI AND FELLEENZ: Do you go out much to speak to share the ideas of Highlander?

HORTON: I only go to those places where somebody invites me who has been or worked at Highlander and knows what Highlander is. I have found some really embarrassing situations for people who thought they knew about Highlander and asked me to come and set up a whole series of programs. Their perceptions of Highlander were not at all correct. So it wasn't very fruitful. So I made a determination as a result of that to never go anywhere unless the people who asked me really knew what I was going to say anyway and wanted it. I don't want to go anywhere unless I can help somebody who is there do what they want to do and unless they think I can help them.

64. For twenty years the residents along Yellow Creek in Middlesburg, Kentucky, had complained about the air and water quality after experiencing abnormally high rates of kidney infections, miscarriages, and other medical problems. Despite these complaints, the State of Kentucky insisted that there were insufficient grounds for it to act against the city. In researching their situation, the Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens discovered in 1981 that about one-quarter of the waste handled by the Middlesburg sewage treatment plant came from the Middlesburg Tanning Company and that there were very high levels of chromium and lead present in the water. A \$31 million class-action suit was launched in 1983.

65. Ed Hunter, a member of the Yellow Creek Concerned Citizens.

66. Probably John Gaventa, who later served as director of Highlander from 1989 to 1993.

67. Interviews were originally conducted by Eliot Wigginton and Sue Thrasher for a volume commemorating Highlander's fiftieth anniversary. It was published in 1992 as *Refuse to Stand Silently By: An Oral History of Grassroots Social Activism in America, 1921–1964*, edited by Eliot Wigginton.

68. See note 27 above.

69. Paulo Freire (1921–97) was a Brazilian critical educator who developed ideas of critical consciousness, dialogue, and education as a way of defeating oppression in his work with Brazilian peasants. Freire saw literacy as a way for people to read and write not only the word, but their worlds as well. Freire's many books include *Pedagogy of Freedom: Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage* (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998); *Education for Critical Consciousness*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Seaberry Press, 1973); and *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Robert R. Barr (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1994). He also collaborated on a book with Horton entitled *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*, ed. Brenda Bell, John Gaventa, and John Peters (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990).

70. Primarily a Latin American movement, liberation theology stresses the necessity of the church's involvement in the fight for economic and political justice in an attempt to liberate people from poverty and oppression. It is based on the idea that a better life should be available for people while on this earth and not just in the next life. For more on liberation theology, see Leonardo and Clodovis Boff's *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), and Gustavo Gutierrez's *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).

71. Christian socialism is based on the idea that socialism is a direct outcome of Christian ideas and that for it to be successful, it must be based on Christian principles. For more on Christian socialism, see John C. Cort's *Christian Socialism: An Informal History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988).

72. See note 5 above.

73. Saul Alinsky (1909–72) was a noted community activist and labor organizer. For more on his ideas, see his books, *Reveille for Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1969) and *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Random House, 1971).