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Letting Our Values and History Guide Us:
Inspiration for Libraries From Myles Horton

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History is always our guide for the future, and always full of capricious surprises.
—Bruce Chatwin

In the aftermath of the horrifying racist marches, violence, and murder at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville in August 2017, people across the country have looked to history and shared values to help them clear their heads and find ways to move America forward. In explaining his decision to take down a statue of Robert E. Lee from Duke University's campus, president Vincent E. Price argued that removing the statue was a way to express Duke's institutional values, including a "commitment to justice, not discrimination; to civil protest, not violence; to authentic dialogue, not rhetoric; and to empathy, not hatred" (Price, 2017). The presidents and boards of the American Library Association, Public Library Association, and the Association of College and Research Libraries have published similar anti-hate statements. ACRL's Board asserted that "ACRL is unwavering in its long-standing commitment to free exchange of different viewpoints, but what happened in Charlottesville was not that; instead, it was terrorism masquerading as free expression" (Morales, 2017). As this statement confirms, our shared professional values were developed over time and provide us with a guide on how to respond when all we want to do is react.

I have long been drawn to and comforted by librarianship's dual tenets of consistency and change. Our underlying principles, values, and challenges are reassuringly constant and stable, providing us with a continuous source of guidance as the materials we buy and provide, the technologies we use, and the communities we serve constantly change and evolve. A particularly instructive time in history for education, libraries, and social justice was the 1930s and 1940s as society struggled to figure out how to deal with a myriad of social and economic ills stemming from institutionalized and systemic racism, imperialism, a vast wage gap between rich and poor, fallout from the Great Depression and WWII, unfair

labor practices, and so forth. When the Library Bill of Rights was first published in the ALA Bulletin after adoption by the Council at the 61st Annual Conference in 1939, it included the introductory statement: "Today indications in many parts of the world point to growing intolerance, suppression of free speech, and censorship affecting the rights of minorities and individuals" (ALA Council, 1939). At that same conference, librarians also discussed propaganda, the selection of a non-librarian for the Librarian of Congress, competing user needs, satisfying funders and the public, challenges of marketing, working with legislators and public officials, and the role of libraries in education and democratic societies. In other words, you could time travel back to San Francisco in the summer of 1939 and be able to get right in on the discussions, so in sync are they with the issues we face today.

Ideas on how to educate in order to grow democracy have also stayed remarkably constant over time. The foundations of experiential education were first popularized by John Dewey with the publication of *Democracy and Education* in 1916. Critical educators working in the 1930s and 40s expanded on experiential education as they examined education through the lens of critical theory to develop critical pedagogy. One of these critical educators was Myles Horton, co-founder of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. Highlander was founded in 1932 as a community folk school and training center to provide free adult education to rural Appalachian communities on everything from life skills and reading to community building and grassroots activism. Horton worked with the uneducated and largely illiterate people of Tennessee first in the labor movement and later in the civil rights movement. Highlander activists' record of success is awe-inspiring as they played an instrumental role in the growth of worker and civil rights throughout the South. To name only a few examples, Rosa Parks attended trainings at Highlander months before she ignited the Montgomery Bus Boycott and Martin Luther King, Jr. first heard Pete Seeger (a Highlander regular) sing "We Shall Overcome" at Highlander's 25th Anniversary Celebration (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998). Horton's focus on popular, adult community education is not only inspiring but also instructive for libraries as we serve and educate our communities—whether they are public, academic, or school communities—during this time of deep political divides and strife.

Horton was born in 1905 to poor working class parents in West Tennessee. Prior to starting a family, his parents were teachers so they valued education. In 1924, they encouraged him to go to Cumberland University in Lebanon, Tennessee. While at Cumberland, he was active in the Student YMCA, which had projects and programs to deal with racial and economic inequality and other issues of social justice. Horton was troubled that while the YMCA talked about racial inequity as a problem and had developed programs to address it, they remained segregated in all of their meetings. He became convinced that learning is about doing, and that just talking about a problem will not change it (Adams, 1986).

The summer before he graduated from Cumberland, the Presbyterian Church sent Horton to the tiny mountain community of Ozone, Tennessee to organize vacation Bible schools. When Horton was there, most of the people who could find jobs worked in coal mines or the lumber industry. Others had left the area in search of work in textile mills only to return a short time later without finding work and bitter about their inability to feed, clothe, and adequately shelter their families. Horton wanted to help the community but didn't think the Bible school programs he was tasked with organizing were doing enough, so he changed things up.

Horton asked the parents of the vacation Bible school children to come to the church at night to talk about their problems. He was amazed when they actually showed up that first night and continued to show up in larger and larger numbers each night. Horton did not have lessons prepared for the attendees, instead asking them to talk to each other about their problems and brainstorm solutions. For many of the issues they discussed, they found their own answers, and for others, the community asked Horton to find experts to help them. For example, one night a man who tested wells taught attendees how to test wells for typhoid. Through this process, the citizens of Ozone learned that many of their problems could be solved by talking to their neighbors and Horton learned that "the teacher's job was to get them talking about those problems, to raise and sharpen questions, and to trust people to come up with the answers" (Horton et al., 1998).

Having decided that his future was in adult education, Horton went back to Cumberland to finish college and then went on to earn graduate degrees from Union Theological Seminary at Columbia and Chicago University. In addition to reading and attending classes to develop his ideas, Horton also visited different schools and organizations. He spent hours with Jane Addams, the legendary co-founder of Chicago's Hull House, trying to get a feel for what Hull House had been like in the beginning, what its struggles had been, and how the founders achieved the momentum and community support it needed to thrive. He also spent time in Denmark studying Danish folk high schools, which have offered free and low-cost continuing education experiences since 1844 for the farming population on Nordic history, folklore, music, literature and language, and geography, and to discuss current political and social issues (Corl, 1981).

Based on his research, experience, and experimentation, Horton established Highlander to be problem-centered and student-centered. An advocate of co-created curriculum, he argued that "since I chose to work with poor, oppressed people, I had to take into consideration that they'd never been allowed to value their own experience; that they'd been told it was dirt and that only teachers and experts knew what was good for them" (Horton et al., 1998, p. 57). For example, basic economics was taught at Highlander, including sessions on surplus value. After one class,

> "an unemployed nurse from Gruetli, Tennessee,(…) who'd brought a basket of onions, bacon, and canned fruit to Highlander to pay her tuition, told [Horton] 'When I was working at the hosiery mill in Chattanooga, we were told that we would have to take a wage cut or the mill would go out of business. Of course, we took the cut. About ten weeks later, I read in the paper that the daughter of the mill owner was sailing for Europe to spend the winter. I suppose it was the surplus value we had produced that paid her way'" (Adams, 1986, p. 35).

Horton saw vocational education, which was what was normally offered to blue collar workers, as wholly different from education for citizenship. To learn for citizenship, students have to have a say in what they need to know and they have to be empowered by the learning process. To meet the goals of helping workers develop into strong citizens, Highlander used a three-prong approach to education with a residence program, a community program, and an extension program. The community program consisted of classes that were offered

based on what community members asked for. Classes never just originated from the staff at Highlander; they came from requests or ideas born in the community. Residence students were invited based on the promise they demonstrated as local leaders or organizers. The extension program was taught by residence students along with staff in the field as they worked on strikes or organizing in communities that needed their help.

When I first discovered Horton, I was struggling with how to teach information literacy at a comprehensive state school. While the students had far more formal education than most of the Highlander students, they often seemed illiterate in terms of understanding information in the way they needed to for success in our current and changing world. When we consider literacy, we often think that being able to read and write are the basics everyone needs, but Horton believed in other equally important basics that were relevant to the people he worked with. For example, being able to stage a protest and demand more from bosses were basic skills (literacies, if you will) that the people he worked with felt they needed. There were also more mundane skills that they taught each other, but importantly, the community identified the skills they needed to learn. Information literacy is a basic literacy that is fundamental to people living and working today and will only continue to grow in importance. Once you consider the flow of information a basic literacy, the urgency to develop information literacy programming and classes that empower people and instill critical reflection grows in intensity.

After the Charlottesville crisis, leaders across the country visibly struggled to find their feet as they worked to reconcile American ideals of free speech and free expression with the growing violence, unrest, and uncertainty in communities across the country. Libraries can be a powerful force during this time of turmoil. By providing communities with tools to develop their own educational ideas, problem solve, learn essential literacies, and challenge the status quo, we will move closer to meeting our professional ideal of libraries that embrace the "free exchange of different viewpoints" (Morales, 2017) and "advocate for the rights of socially excluded, marginalized, and underrepresented people, … act[ing] in solidarity with all groups or individuals resisting attempts to abridge the rights of free expression and free access to ideas" (ALA Council, 2017). The lessons Horton learned and taught about empowering the disempowered through problem-based, student-centered, and co-developed curricula can serve as a powerful guide for librarians looking for ideas and practices to help them teach for a more democratic, equitable, and just society.

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