

SNCC 40th Anniversary Conference: The Legacy of Ms. Ella Baker

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Location: Raleigh, NC - Tupper Memorial Baptist Church

Host

Dr. H.C. Miller - Senior Pastor, Tupper Memorial Baptist Church

Moderator:

Jacqueline Brockington - Ella Baker's niece

Speakers:

[Victoria Gray Adams](#) - Citizenship Education Program, S.C.L.C., 1963-1966;
National Committee, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, 1964-1968;
Challenge delegation, Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, 1964

[Bob Moses](#) - SNCC Veteran, Co-founder of Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party

H.C. Miller: I want to say good morning to everyone. Good morning again. We are ready to begin. Again. Good morning to this lovely Saturday morning in Raleigh, North Carolina, every morning in Raleigh, North Carolina is a lovely morning.

I am Dr. H.C. Miller the senior pastor here at Tupper Memorial Baptist Church. I stand this morning with great joy and pleasure to greet you and to welcome you to the facilities here at Tupper, with a fanned attempt to lay aside my biases. I want to say that you should be at Tucker this morning.

Tupper Memorial Baptist Church has a unique connection with Shaw University and the community here. Unique in the sense that Tupper Memorial Baptist Church is 132 years old. It is named after Henry Martin Tupper, who is the founding president of Shaw University. So we have that connection with the university and with this community. So subsequently again, I insist that you should be here this morning.

Welcome to Tupper. Welcome to our facilities. Please make yourselves at home. We're excited about having you here and we've blessed the Lord that you're able to be with us this morning and again, but please be at home and know that you're in the right place at the right time. And you certainly are about the right things. I greet you in the name of our Christ. I greet you in the name of the Tupperites who dwell and worship here. I greet you in the name and in the sense of the residents of this area.

Again, we're glad to have you here. If there's anything that we can do to make your stay more pleasant, please don't hesitate to let us know. Thank you for being here this morning. And again, good morning to you.

Jacqueline Brockington: Good morning, everyone. Um, sorry that we are running late and because of that, we will have to cut short both sessions because as you know, if you are invited to a luncheon, you must be there on time. So we will attempt to cut everything fairly short, but leave enough time to at least have a general discussion about the topic, which is going to be the legacy of [Ms. Baker](#).

Now you may want to know who I am. I am Jacqueline Brockington and I am Ms. Baker's niece. And for all purposes, she was my mother because I lived with her since I was nine. So to me, she is my mom. So if I refer to her as Aunt Ella, you will understand because that's just a natural name.

I wanted to, first of all, say to you that when we speak of Aunt Ella, it will vary as to what people might think her legacy would be depending on where you work with her and when you work with her, she has been involved in a lot of areas. And when I think of Shaw University, I want to just give you my first memory of Aunt Ella talking about Shaw. And the memory was regarding organizing some of the students, her first organization, because they didn't allow the young people to walk across the campus and hold hands.

To her this was important. If you had some affection for someone, you should be able to show it. She felt that this was a cause. So this was one of her first causes at Shaw and my first memory of Shaw. I just wanted to throw that in so you will understand that this legacy goes back many, many, many years. Initially, what I'd like to do is to let the two panelists introduce themselves and tell you something about them.

And then we will discuss some of the legacies that various people might think should be given to Aunt Ella. And then we would like to ask a few people from the audience who had an opportunity to work with her, to also give a few of their ideas related to the subject. If you will remember being at a meeting with Aunt Ella, she always said, we are having this meeting. We are together. And I want you to think about what you are going to do after this meeting.

While we are doing this, I want you to think of what we are going to do after this meeting. So I want to introduce first the panelists, and then they will tell you something about themselves and then we will continue. And I will take over after that. Thank you.

Victoria Gray Adams: Good morning. I usually don't do my greeting in this manner, but because we are running about an hour late, I'm going to modify my approach. I do want to say thank you for the opportunity for being a participant in this most appropriate and necessary event—appropriate and necessary event.

And I, in the African tradition, always at a gathering of this sort invite those of us present to both acknowledge the ancestors. Those who are no longer with us, those who paved the way, those who went before us. I like to acknowledge their presence because in keeping with my faith tradition, I do believe they are present. I do believe that Ms. Baker is very much present this morning and the very many others.

In acknowledgement and welcome to this invisible cloud of witnesses, I invite you to join me and just take a moment and call the name of one that you remember. Usually we do a moment of silence in memory, respect, et cetera. I say, do a moment of silence. And then the one or ones that you remember say where we can all hear you, the name of one of those people. Call their names.

And there's a thing in the African tradition that says as long as the names are called, they're with us. So I invite you now to take a moment of silence and I will break the silence by calling the name of the one whom I'm welcoming this morning, acknowledging and welcoming. Ms. Baker.

[audience says names]

Thank you for your enthusiasm and willingness to join us in this moment of acknowledgement and welcome and greetings both to the visible and the invisible. All right, now then let's see. Where do we go from here? The heart of my sharing really can be found in the anthology of the Mississippi movement edited by Susan Erenrich [referring to the book *Freedom Is a Constant Struggle: An Anthology of the Mississippi Civil Rights Movement*]

I don't know if Susan's here or not, but this is it. And I was invited to do an article for this and I chose to do mine on Ms. Baker. You can really find the heart of my message there in the event that the lady starts to pull my dress tail or something back there because of the time limits. Okay.

Preparing my tribute to Ms. Baker was a journey within itself. And it helped me to understand as [Chuck McDew](#) shared yesterday, the deeper meaning of some of our spiritual teachings. For example—and I'd like to use this one because it says—"What I feel there is no greater love than this: that a person lay down his or her life for their friends, their brothers, their sisters."

For me, this is the perfect description of Ms. Baker. She laid down her life for you and for me, and for the many who would connect to us, she might have lived her life—genius that she was—in a much different, more personally profitable manner. But instead she lived it for the liberation of her people, which for Ms. Baker meant all people.

And she has been a perfect example of one who lived the servant life, as many who said, who preceded me on this panel? They never heard her talk about her faith tradition. I say, she didn't need to talk it. She walked her talk. I say again, greater love have no one than this to lay down, to offer, to give one's life for others. For one's friends.

The legacy of Ms. Baker was, is the legacy of love in its most unconditional wardrobe. And now let me share with you what I discovered on my journey of defining Ms. Baker, describing this lady who was my mentor. My script got misplaced here. I'm sorry. Give me a moment to find it. Should be right here.

Ella Josephine Baker: communicator, initiator, enabler, and prophetess. The word became flesh and dwelled among us. When I think of Ms. Baker, when I attempt or am asked to describe her, the above words come to mind, and for me, they say it all. For many, the writings of the Bible are perceived stories about people and other beings from other times and places.

But for me, self-described Christian activist amended to spiritual activist, the bible is a guidebook, a handbook, a blueprint on becoming. Consequently, the opening statement and the word became flesh and dwelled among us is an attempt to give context to my offering on and about Ms. Baker.

I'm not really sure when I first met Ms. Baker about the way she was always Ms. Baker to me as my cousin Joyce [Ladner] indicated for her. And she was here, I believe on yesterday. What is clearly remembered is the mutual respect and affection that we shared and the knowledge of our being kindred spirits.

Remembered too, is the tremendous admiration I had for her and the equally tremendous inspiration she was and continues to be for me. As a communicator, Ms. Baker was second to none. She clearly understood the importance of effective communication and its elements, speech, attitudes, actions, and had the ability to relate both appropriately and positively to the target audience.

Ms. Baker said it so well in referring to her experience with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. She said: "I had no difficulty relating to the young people. I spoke their language in terms of the meaning of what they had to say. I didn't change my speech pattern and they didn't have to change their speech pattern, but we were able to communicate."

Ms. Baker was equally proficient in communicating with whatever segment of the society with which she was interacting. Her secret was having the ability to talk with people and not at, or about them. As Ms. Baker put it in an interview, your success depends on both your disposition, personality that is, and your capacity to sort of stimulate people and how you carry yourself in terms of not being above people. Truly, she was a great communicator.

As an initiator, Ms. Baker exhibited again and again her ability to move ideas, dreams, strategists, and people from paper and rhetoric to reality. Each of the major civil rights organizations and many other significant groups and agencies were beneficiaries of her unique ability to define the need, develop the strategies, and implement the actions to meet the need.

She was a savior and a redeemer, according to Victoria, to the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People, more commonly known as the NAACP, at all levels of the organization.

At one time or another, she inspired and prodded Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.] to call the meeting of the South's key Black leaders, which resulted in the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The first Southern-based South-wide civil rights organization.

She was the key person in support of the formation and organization of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the student organization that energized and inspired Southern Black communities from the Mississippi Delta and across the South to stand up and take responsibility for their lives.

She was there when the idea of organizing an alternative political party evolved following the [1963 successful Freedom Vote](#), the [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party \[MFDP\]](#), which became a model for effective, independent political organizing and action. And it affected the abolition of the all-white Democratic Party in Mississippi. Therefore, altering the direction of the Democratic Party in the state of Mississippi and all across America. The list goes on.

Ms. Baker, the initiator, was called into service in many diverse communities of our society to include federal government agencies. As an initiator. She had few peers and left us a legacy untold numbers of emulators. Many of whom are seated here this morning and who are in attendance at this gathering.

I believe that Ms. Baker's most profound contribution was that of enabler. She had the ability to inspire people of every imaginable ilk. This genius flowed from her deep faith in people's capacity to do what is necessary to respond to their needs and to resolve the contradictions of their lives once they obtain the understanding, acquire the information and the support person or system to work and share with them.

Ms. Baker believed—insisted—that the salvation of a person and the people must come from within. That the struggle must be engaged by the struggler in cooperation with significant others, having the compassion and needed elements, which they themselves do not possess.

She was equipped by training, experience, courage, and compassion to offer and share the missing elements where indicated. Thus, she assisted people in discovering their own gifts and talents. And to release these into the larger community. This deep conviction and belief in giving of one self to the development of the larger community was her way of being—capital B-E-I-N-G. Her way of being.

In so doing she inspired and created a broad body of leadership that spans the country and reaches into every segment of the society. Ms. Baker, the enabler, dedicated her life to the premise that a strong people have no need for strong leaders.

Finally, Ms. Baker was a prophetess, one who envisioned the future, predicted possible outcomes of situations, conditions, and events, and called to accountability all whose lives touched hers, imploring us to vision the impossible—the not yet. To define the contradictions, to develop proposals and strategies to overcome and eliminate the blocks or contradictions, to determine the tactics required to actualize the proposals, to implement the tactics that will release the impossible dream into the possible: the is—capital I, capital S.

Today, Ms. Baker's prophecy, her conviction of a strong enabled people standing up and taking responsibility for their destinies is taking place in communities around the globe as far away as Eastern Europe, South Africa, et cetera. The great civil rights campaign of the fifties and sixties inspired people under oppressive regimes to take heart and deliver themselves by their own collective actions and unbelievable timeframes.

You know, people would say “no way can you do this or that in this amount of time,” but they have done so. I do not consider it an exaggeration to say that long and wide shadow of Ms. Baker may very well have influenced the actions taking place in South Africa.

As we celebrate in these times, sharing our impressions and experiences of living in her time and her world, it seems to me that the one word which ties it all together is educator. In all of the different areas that Ms. Baker served, under all of the different hats that she wore, she taught.

She taught a new set of the three R's: relationships,—the first R—respect differences, responsibility for ours and all life, and risk-taking so as to free rather than control people. The greatest tribute that we can pay Ms. Baker is to be like her, commit our lives to becoming the embodied words of love, justice, freedom, and peace.

Let me end this sharing with an adage that encapsulates the legacy of Ms. Baker, for me: “Accomplishing task through people is a different paradigm than building a people through the

accomplishment of task. With one, you get things done. With the other, you get them done with far greater creativity, synergy, and effectiveness. And then in the process you build the capacity to do more in the future as well.” Thank you.

Jacqueline Brockington: As everyone might have known, initially when the conference was held at Shaw, and Aunt Ella wanted to make sure that the young people would be involved in the activities, there were some people who felt that it should not be that way. But she always felt that the youth should be involved. They should be able to make their mistakes and learn from them. They should have some assistance from the older people.

And at this point I wanted to introduce one of the people who worked with her in the SNCC program. And one of the people that she called her child. Each of the young people that she worked with were considered her children. So at this point, I want to introduce you to one of her children.

Bob Moses: That got to me. I think what I would like to say is that...Toni Morrison has a phrase characterizing some of the movement people, as she said, they did the walk of the trees.¹ So Ella did the walk of the trees for us. And as I think about her walk, there are three ways that I think for us to look at it.

One was that there's a way to live in this country and struggle. The second was that the struggle should be radical in her sense that you go to the root of something. And in that way, we are thinking about the people that we struggle with. Ella taught us to struggle with the people at the bottom. And then the third way was her sense, which Jackie [Jacqueline Brockington] here, reminds herself, her sense of family, that in this walk that you don't sacrifice family.

So those are the three legacies for me. That you have this long, long walk and you learn how to do it. You are in struggle and you are consciously in struggle and you can carve out a life in this country in struggle. Your struggle should be radical. It should go to the root of some problem. And it should work with the people who are at the bottom. And you should carve out, as you go, your family. Thank you.

Jacqueline Brockington: Now, as I said, I wanted to include some of the people in the audience who might want to add something. And then I will have a slight discussion regarding this. Are there any people who would want to include anything? I always like to include anyone that wants to be, but do not feel pressured, only if you would like to. If not, what I wanted to include—Oh, I'm sorry.

Audience Member: Is the second plenary session going to be held?

¹ This reference to Toni Morrison's phrase “the walk of the trees,” from her essay “A Slow Walk of Trees”, evokes the quiet, steadfast strength and rootedness of movement people. It suggests a kind of dignified endurance—people who, like trees, stand firm through storms, grow steadily over time, and draw power from deep roots.

Jacqueline Brockington: Yes, it will be, yes. I'm going to limit this so that each one can have their own session. Right? Sorry. We were so delayed in time, so we will include everyone. Yes.

Audience Member: I just wanted to know if Diane Nash had gotten here, whether she's with us [indistinct].

Jacqueline Brockington: Thank you. Now, it has often been said that—Ms. Baker, and I will attempt to do that. Ms. Baker was not well known or a lot of people didn't know her. And there's a reason for that. It's because she felt that her job was to help, as Bob stated, the people who wanted to join as a unit and work. And oftentimes people would say, "there's nothing that I can do." I didn't go to college. I didn't do this. I can't do that.

She would always find something that the person could do to feel included. And I'll give you an example of a project that she had in New York City, which was to get the community involved in the school system. And at numerous meetings that I would attend with her and do my homework in the back of the room, she would say to the people that we are all going to do this together. And someone might stand and say again, "I can't do anything." So she would say, "Can you lick a stamp? Can you go to the post office? Can you babysit? So that those people who want to come to the meeting can?"—to show everyone that everyone must be included.

And I also think that's why in the sixties, everything was so successful because everyone had a job. Your job could be transporting people who were not riding a bus. Your job could be feeding people who had nothing to eat or no place to stay in people's homes. So in an effort to work with people, I think one of the main things that we must remember is that she wanted to include everyone.

And there's a phrase that is used that we have: "the grassroot people." And Aunt Ella felt that she was one of those people. And if you think about the root of a tree, the roots are the parts of the tree that provide nourishment and strength. And those branches at the top rely on those roots. And if those roots are not very strong, then the tree will not be very strong.

So the people who may be on those top branches must remember that the people at the bottom of the tree are the ones who are supporting them. So when you think of being a grassroot person, remember that that's a very, very strong person.

Now, again, we are beginning to see that the young people want more to be involved and they should be. And all of us should remember at the time that we felt that we wanted to be involved and the elders wouldn't allow us to do that. So now, as we become elders, we must remember that we have to allow the youth to begin to take over.

And as Aunt Ella would say, she would never indicate that the young person was wrong. She might feel that what you were saying was absolutely wrong, but she was able to get you to

understand that it was wrong by her conversation and her contribution to whatever you were suggesting and making it feel that you were the one who was able to come to the conclusion that it should be done in another way. So that in itself is an art. Being able to get people to realize that they themselves may have not been doing the right thing at first, but due to growth and development they have.

Now, there was a time that there were groups—older people—who felt that the younger group should not be involved. And I know that there were times when Aunt Ella had lengthy meetings, discussing the fact that she would stand up and support the young people at all times, no matter what.

I think one of the legacies is that she was able to organize and to organize with a purpose, to organize those people who were most interested, give everyone an opportunity to be included and be successful at the end. I think one of the legacies would be—in my estimation—the fact that she was an organizer, as was stated, she felt that anything that you did, you should do it to the best of your ability, no matter what it might be.

And oftentimes she would say, if you have a job, you work at it to the best of your ability. If that evening you decide that you're going out to a party, then you want to enjoy that to the best of your ability. So whatever you do, do it the best that you can. And at the end, you will find out that you have succeeded.

Oftentimes we will take on a job and we will attempt to do too many jobs. That's very difficult. To have too many jobs, to focus on one job at a time is most important. And to do that is difficult at this time because we are branching out to different things each day. But let's all begin to think of focusing on one particular thing, getting those people who are interested in what we are interested in and working toward a particular goal.

I have been told that we have an announcement by Hanson Jeffries, and I wanted to allow that before we ended. Cause I might forget. So would you please do that now?

Hasan Jeffries: Good morning. Friday's group-centered leadership session decided that we would focus on one task, that being the participant profile, in an effort to facilitate communication at the end of the conference and to ease some of the burden on our already overburdened, but much successful conference organizers.

Hopefully you should have received one of these as you walked in. If you didn't, someone will be coming down the aisles to pass one to you. And if you would just take a moment to fill it out, and for those of you who have already filled it out, if you could pass it to the aisles, we will now come and collect them. For those who are not here, if you could please spread the word that we are doing this and we'll keep these around so that we can keep in touch afterward. Thank you.

Jacqueline Brockington: And as Aunt Ella would say, thank you, young man. We could see that the young man is focusing on a task. So we are very happy about that. I think there's a young lady in the back that doesn't have one. So we want to make sure that everyone gets one, please,

Audience Member: I just wanted to say, can we get students or old activists—

Jacqueline Brockington: Don't use that "old" word. We don't use that word. The more mature people.

Audience Member: [indistinct] SNCC roster [indistinct] find out who's in what state....

Jacqueline Brockington: I didn't understand the first part about the younger people and the more mature people. What did you want?

Audience Member: She meant younger and older students.

Jacqueline Brockington: Oh, okay. Thank you. I think that they want to make sure that this is filled out so they will have some way of keeping in touch and hopefully everyone will ever so often get together for support.

I'm going to end with a statement regarding one of Aunt Ella's favorite songs, and it has gotten to be a favorite of mine. And the song is "This Little Light of Mine." And sometimes in driving, I hum it to myself. And I always like to sort of end things with that song because I want everyone to think of where your light is going to shine.

Now, there are many places your light can shine. It can shine at home. It can shine in your neighborhood. It can shine on your job. It can shine on the street. It can shine any place that you might be in attendance.

And sometimes we have to make a definite effort to make that light shine. Sometimes we get a little down and we say, "I'm not up to this, or I don't feel like doing this." But you think of your light and the accumulation of all the lights and how bright things could be and how much better the world could be because all of us have something to contribute.

It may not be my interest. My interest may not be your interest, but all of us have something to contribute. So I want, if you don't mind, and I'm not a singer, I would like if we could just end with that song, "This Little Light of Mine," and I will also just point to a couple of people to tell me where your light is going to shine. Alright.

[signing "This Little Light of Mine"]

Jacqueline Brockington: I'm very sorry that we had to be delayed, but at the last minute I understand we had to move to another facility. So in order to include the next group, we are

going to stop at this point. And hopefully we all meet at the luncheon and be able to have some conversation. Yes.

Audience Member: We have a 15 minute break and [indistinct]

Jacqueline Brockington: No, no. We are only going to have a stretch. Right. Those people who would like to stand and stretch may stretch, but we wanna continue right away.