

Fannie Lou Hamer

Rev. Julia Older

I fell in love with Fannie Lou Hamer in 1964 during the Democratic National Convention when she led the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to the hall and asked to be seated. She was challenging the right of the all-white Mississippi delegation to represent the people of her whole state. She and her delegates were refused seats and the argument was taken to the Credentials committee. The Committee offered a compromise of two seats but Fannie responded,

"We didn't come all this way for no two seats when all of us is tired."

That was the exact truth. She had a knack for seeing and saying the truth. She also said many times, "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired." She was wondrously wise and although she said things in a colloquial way, she so often got them absolutely right.

I fell in love with her because I saw that she had the courage to stand there and not back down no matter how folks tried to embarrass her and make her step away. And they tried. Over and over. Sometimes her own people got scared and stood back and she had to stand there all alone. Even then she did not give up and she did not give in.

Let me tell you more about her life. Her grandfather was a slave but by the time she was a little girl, her parents had become sharecroppers. They worked all day long on someone else's farm and when the crops went to market, they got half the profits usually minus the cost of seeds and fertilizer. That is a hard life and it is not fair pay.

Fannie was the youngest of 20 children! By the time she was six, she was working in the fields. On her first day, E.W. Brandon, the farm owner, told her that if she could pick 30 pounds of cotton he would give her cookies and crackerjacks. Her people had no money for such treats, so she picked as hard and as fast as she could and at the end of the week, she had picked 30 pounds all by herself. The next week, she picked 60 pounds. By the time she was 13 years old, she could pick three hundred pounds a week. (Look up at the center of interest and those little cotton balls, which are very light, and imagine how much you would have to pick to get to even one pound. Maybe hundreds. I can't imagine how hard it must have been to pick three hundred. It lets us know something important about how hard she was willing to work for what she wanted.)

By the time she was 12 she had to drop out of school and work full time. School was only for 4 months a year for farm workers. She worked six days a week but on Sundays she went with her family to Stranger's Home Baptist Church. It was there that she learned

“This Little Light of Mine” which became her favorite song. It was a song that many people came to associate with her.

Her people, the Townsends, soon had enough money to buy a little piece of land for themselves and a little house and a mule, a couple of cows and a few chickens. A man who lived nearby was evidently jealous of their good fortune and poisoned their mule and cows. Without the means to farm, the family had to move back to E.W.’s place.

When Fannie was 27 she married a man everyone called “Pap.” I think he must have been a good man because even when she got in serious trouble doing what she believed was right, he backed her up. She was committed to fixing some of the injustice she saw around her.

When she was close to 40 years old, and she and Pap were living on W.D. Marlowe’s plantation, she went to a meeting organized by SCLC, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and she made up her mind to get on a bus and go to Indianola, the county seat, to register to vote. Before that meeting she didn’t know black people COULD vote. When they got to the registrar, they were told they had to pass a literacy test, a test showing they could read a complicated section of the state constitution. None of them could read well enough to pass it. It must have been terribly disappointing. Then, on the way home, the police stopped the bus because, they said, it was the wrong color. Everybody inside was arrested and put in jail.

Marlowe, her landlord, told her if she ever tried to do such a thing again as register to vote, she would have to leave his land. Even though she had lived there and worked for him for 18 years, she left that same day and went to stay with another family.

Ten days later, night riders fired bullets into her new home.

Well, that didn’t make her stop either. She just began to work harder on voter registration programs with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

All of those mean things that were done to Ms. Hamer made her just plain angry. She didn’t back down for anybody. She was determined and she studied the state constitution and she went back to try again telling the registrar that she would continue to come back as many times as it took until she passed. On her third trip she passed. She was registered to vote . . . but when election day came, she was turned away at the polls.

Can you believe it! What frustration.

I would for sure have given up, but Fannie Lou Hamer started making speeches. She organized meetings. She spoke in churches. She led people in song. And she marched up and down the state of Mississippi attracting attention.

Remember how little schooling she had, and how hard it was for her to read, and none of her people held any power and yet, there she went organizing and fighting for her rights. Think about it.

I know I sometimes back off because I don't feel ready; I don't feel qualified; I'm not sure I have enough training; I think, "well somebody else would be better." But those thoughts didn't stop Fannie Lou. She refused to sit down when she knew she was right and she didn't expect anybody else to stand up for her when she could stand up herself. I wonder how anyone gets that brave?

In 1963, in early June, Ms. Hamer and other civil rights workers were on a bus that had traveled as far as Winona, Mississippi when they were ordered off the bus and taken to jail. What happened to her in that jail was so awful and so violent, I am not able to talk about it at an intergenerational service. She was left with injuries to her eye and her kidneys that lasted the rest of her life and forever after she had to walk with a cane. But that didn't make her quit, either. Ms. Hamer was one of these rare people who could not be made to quit when she knew she was right.

I'm pretty sure that if I was arrested and threatened, and especially if people beat me, I would be able to come up with a pretty good excuse for why I should stop doing whatever got me in trouble. Not Ms. Hamer. Even after her injuries, she kept on moving forward.

She founded the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which included black and white people. The regular Democratic Party in the state only had white members. Altogether, Fannie Lou registered sixty three thousand African Americans into her party. 63,000! The next summer, she led 67 delegates to the national Democratic convention and the rest of the country watched as they tried to be seated. She was the spokesperson.

Over national television, she told the story of all the difficulties and humiliation she and others had endured just trying to get to vote. She told America she hoped for a better day.

While she was speaking, the phones began to ring. The credentials committee was swamped with calls asking that they allow her delegation to be seated.

I wish I could say that all those calls and her own heroism got them seats . . .but it did not. Only two seats were awarded. But she was unforgettable and her party continued to grow. Even some of the party regulars joined and the name was changed to the Mississippi Loyalist Democratic Party.

Four year later at the next Democratic convention, in Chicago, Illinois, in 1968, the credential committee tried again to offer a compromise. Again, Fannie refused and this

time, at last, finally, it paid off. She was seated. When she came in and sat down, everyone on the convention floor rose and applauded. It was an astonishing and very emotional moment and I got to see it on television.

And now you know a little more about why last November, when on the night of the election, Barack Obama gave his acceptance speech in Chicago where that 1968 convention was held, all of us who remember something of those days, and remember the courage and tenacity of a poorly educated sharecropper named Fannie Lou Hammer, it was such an astounding moment.

All that suffering, all that struggle, and this week, on Tuesday, we will have a man of half African heritage sworn in as our president.

If only Fannie Lou could have guessed how far, *how far*, we would come in 40 years.

Blessed be and Amen.