**REFLECTIONS ON THE LIFE OF FANNIE LOU HAMER**

**by Rosemarie Freeney-Harding**

**Delivered at the Boston Research Center for the 21st Century**

**February 12, 2002**

Good evening. I'd like to thank the Boston Research Center and the Wellesley Centers for Women for the invitation to speak to you on the occasion of the inaugural Women's Lecture Series on Common Values in honor of Fannie Lou Hamer and her work on economic justice. I'd like to particularly thank Ginny Straus, Masao Yokota, Sumru Erkut, and Shirley Chandl for their warm hospitality.

My remarks will be brief because we have a wonderful evening ahead of us with my friend Linda Stout. I simply want to tell you a few things about the extraordinary woman we are honoring tonight, Fannie Lou Hamer or Mrs. Hamer, as she was known to everyone in the movement.

Among people who are familiar with the history of the southern Freedom Movement, frequently referred to as the Civil Rights Movement, Fannie Lou Hamer is a towering figure. A tenant farmer from the Mississippi Delta, Mrs. Hamer was a master organizer, grassroots human rights worker, and spokesperson for many millions of Americans whose claims to full citizenship in this country were viciously and systematically denied.

Many people know about her courage at the 1964 National Democratic Party Convention Convention in Atlantic City where she and an interracial group of freedom workers challenged the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party. Others know of her conviction to keep fighting for freedom and justice in spite of being kicked off the land where she sharecropped and her livelihood thus removed from her. And still others may know the now infamous story of her being beaten nearly to death in a small Mississippi jail in June 1963.

What you may not know, and what I want to share with you briefly tonight, is the warmth, the humor, and the great compassionate wisdom of Mrs. Hamer. She came to Atlanta soon after she received the horrible beating in the Winona jail after she and a group of black organizers returned to Mississippi by bus from a voter registration workshop in South Carolina. My husband, Vincent, had been one of the workshop's facilitators and had encouraged the organizers to leave the workshop determined to act out their convictions of freedom and to claim their rights in all situations.

On the trip back home, when the bus stopped to discharge and pick up passengers, members of the group challenged the by-then illegal segregation of restaurants and bathrooms at interstate bus terminals. In Winona, Mississippi, they were arrested by local police, taken to jail, and several of them, including Mrs. Hamer, were beaten with deathly fervor. Two local black prisoners had been forced by the sheriff to hit Mrs. Hamer with a leather-covered club until she was bloody, scarred, and nearly unconscious. One of her companions said later that Mrs. Hamer's back had felt like hard snakeskin.

When Mrs. Hamer came to Atlanta after this experience, she came to give an official report to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); she also met with a group of Freedom workers at Mennonite House, the voluntary service agency my husband and I directed there. When she arrived, Mrs. Hamer's face was still swollen. Her speech was distorted by the bloating in her lips. But even in the midst of that pain, she was able to tease Vincent and tell him, "If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be in this mess. You encouraged me to do this with all that talk at the workshop." Everyone at the table smiled and laughed. It was both relieving and encouraging to see that Mrs. Hamer's great spirit had not been broken.

During the time in jail, the Freedom workers who had been beaten received no medical attention, although they all had open wounds, contusions, multiple bruises, and some--like Mrs. Hamer--ran fevers. In order to keep themselves encouraged, Mrs. Hamer and her companions sang songs of the movement. They made it through the horror of the ordeal by using their voices to transform the atmosphere around them from one of fear and violence created by their jailers to one of persistent courage and active faith.

This use of music, as a transformative, healing resource was not unusual in the Movement. And for Mrs. Hamer, music and singing was a master organizing and inspiring tool. Mrs. Hamer was deeply steeped in the biblical tradition of the church, and so her use of music and words was one of her greatest strengths as an organizer. Mrs. Hamer was not primarily a soloist, but a song leader. She used her knowledge of the great African- American singing tradition to help Movement participants call up the internal strength, the collective strength, and the ancestral strength in the songs in order to create community. This use of music also inspired the community to move together into danger with a faith that they and their cause were just and healing.

In the mass meetings that took place in the churches, schools, and demonstrations, as well as in that Winona jail, songs like *Go Tell it on a Mountain*, *Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round*, and *This Little Light of Mine* became the instruments by which Movement participants turned uncertainty and fear into a sense of collective power connected to the power of the universe, connected to the will of God that all people live in humane and just relationship to each other.

The song that you will hear now, *This Little Light of Mine*, was one of Mrs. Hamer's favorites. The words are:

*This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine,*

*Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.*

*Everywhere I go, I'm gonna let it shine.*

This was much more than a song to her. It was a testimony to a deep conviction that we all carry within ourselves the divine transformative power of the universe. Through songs and sermons and courageous action, she taught this in every gathering. She was always encouraging women, men, and children to discover their own divine power and to act on it everywhere for the good of the entire community.

That is what she did in the Winona jail. For we later learned that even after she had been deeply wounded, before she left the jail, Mrs. Hamer took the time to speak to the sheriff's wife. Quietly, without bitterness, and with great compassion, Mrs. Hamer reminded this church-going white woman of a familiar text from the New Testament: "God has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on the face of the earth."

In other words, she was saying to the jailer's wife, "You too have the light of freedom, my sister. Please know it, act on it, and let your light shine. Then we will discover the great power of the universe together all over the South, all over the North, all over the world. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine."

Rosemarie Freeney-Harding © 2002