

***Ella Baker: Freedom Bound*, by Joanne Grant, 1998.**

Review by Lisa Abbott

The book provides an overview of the life of Ella Baker, a devoted and talented leader in the struggle for civil rights. Ella Baker's contributions to the civil rights movement include positions as field secretary of the NAACP in the 1940's, the first staff director of the Southern Christian Leadership Council in the 1950's, and mentor of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and countless other grassroots organizations in the 1960's.

Throughout her career, Baker stressed the importance of developing local leadership and fostering participatory democracy. She stayed focused on building a mass movement of empowered, diverse and committed members. Baker often clashed with the more established civil rights organizations, and their leaders, over their reluctance to invest in and support grassroots leadership development.

Ella Baker is one of many unsung heroes of liberation struggles in America. Her life story – which is well told in a documentary film called *Fundi* – provides an important perspective about leadership within the civil rights movement. Baker was a behind-the-scenes player, an organizer. She continually agitated for and nurtured a movement led from the bottom up.

Baker was passionately committed to organizing a mass movement as a strategy to achieve lasting social change. She argued against allowing the movement to become too “leader driven.” She persistently pushed civil rights organizations to invest in the long-term work of developing local leaders and organizations.

This book is a bit dry – despite its remarkable subject. It doesn't do justice to the charged emotions and conflicts of the era. Nevertheless, I highly recommend it as an introduction to an extraordinary woman, leader and role model.

“(She had a different concept about leadership. First, the idea that leadership would emerge in the community, and second the idea of helping leadership grow....That was something different from the SCLC version of leadership...(which was) to project the national leader.” – Robert Moses, activist

“The designation “Fundi” seemed to characterize her. Fundi...is a Swahili word which denotes the person in the community who passes on the wisdom of the elders, the crafts, the knowledge. This is not done in an institutional way...but as an oral tradition, handed down from one generation to the next.” - Joanne Grant, author

“Until the killing of black men, black mothers' sons, becomes as important as the killing of white men, white mothers' sons, we who believe in freedom cannot rest.” – Ella Baker

“Gresahm (a civil rights activist) spoke of Baker as providing the ‘democratic edge.’ By this she meant that Baker urged that every voice be heard. ‘She was a steady influence, keeping all of the carpers at bay, providing space for everyone to make their opinions known, but keeping the disrupters out.’ She had a nurturing tendency. ‘I am here,’ she would say. ‘So are you. And we matter. We change things.’” (Page 209 in *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound* by Joanne Grant)