

## *The Limitations of Charismatic Leaders*

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The only problem I have with movements has to do with my reservations about charismatic leaders. There's something about having one that can keep democracy from working effectively. But we don't have movements without them. That's why I had no intellectual problem supporting King as a charismatic leader.

Myles Horton, Chapter 10, *The Long Haul*

This February conflates Super Tuesday (24 state presidential primaries on February 5) with Black history month. It is a moment of confluence that has caused me to reflect on the charismatic leadership of both Barack Obama and Martin Luther King, Jr. It appears that Obama has energized young people with his message of "hope" and "change" to a degree not seen since the social movement of the Sixties when King and the Kennedy's inspired their respective constituencies to act collectively for social justice. But I find myself wary of the Obama effect, not the least of which because he is full of sweeping generalizations without supportive details and that neo-conservatives seem to be among his closest economic advisors.

My inability to get excited about Obama led me to reread Chapter 10 (called "Charisma") in Myles Horton's autobiography, *The Long Haul*. Horton was the founder and director of the Highlander Folk School that trained Rosa Parks and many other local leaders of the Civil Rights movement. The "something" that Horton is referring to in the quotation above is the tendency of charismatic leaders, by virtue of their charisma, to inhibit the growth of those around them. In the case of King and the movement, this was very problematic when King was assassinated.

Horton reflected in his autobiography that King

. . . was so impressive in his role that he cast a shadow over less able speakers and activists, who had the tendency to say, "Let Martin do it, Martin can do it so well, he can be the voice." And Martin accepted that role, although he might not have welcomed it. . . . One of the criticism I made to him was, "You are so much the powerful leader that it's hard for people who work with you to have a role they can grow in. You could spend time making room under the tree and developing other leaders to take on some of the responsibilities." Martin would say, "In my mind I know that has to be done, and it is happening," but from my perspective, it looked as if he had never developed anybody who could take his place after he was killed. . . . The best of his replacements could do was try to create carbon copies of him, not become leaders in their own right. When it came to original thinking and being creative, people would say, "well, what would Martin have done?" and try to do the same thing. To me, this was the great weakness of the movement.

If we are to have any real hope of real change, we need to continue to position ourselves so we are ready for the next social movement, one that is perhaps aware of the limitations of charismatic leaders and the necessity of developing local leadership. Obama can create the hope but he cannot create the change. Only local people acting collectively, spontaneously and creatively over a sustained period of time can do that. But this cannot happen without training and experience on the local level. Horton advises us

We cannot create movements, so if we want to be part of a movement when it comes, we have to get ourselves into a position—by working with organizations that deal with structural change—to be on the inside of that movement when it comes, instead of on the outside trying to get accepted.