

The Legacy of Rustin, Black, Queer and Quaker

Under a bald moon and cold February wind, 14 adult learners gathered to watch the film *Rustin* together. *Rustin* is a blockbuster movie describing how Bayard Rustin became a critical organizer for MLK and the civil rights movement. Why stagger through the bitter winter to watch it together? Because of popcorn and soda? Maybe. Because Rustin's story was smokin'? Sure. Mostly we left our warm homes to learn together how to be better humans. Humans (Quakers too) have strayed from the path. What does Rustin, an African American queer Quaker, have to teach us?

We all identified as Quaker, with different genders, different needles moving on the queer spectrum. Rustin is a charismatic, sharp thinking, strategic NV activist. He is central in the heritage for African Americans to know Blacks have formed the RSOF (Religious Society of Friends). Rustin states, "My activism did not spring from being Black or gay but from being Quaker." How do we reach a deeper understanding of living our faith? All of us living on the Atlantic coast can learn something about standing in the way (of injustice) or surrendering the battle to win the fight.

The film opens with images of Ruby Bridges, the white faces of women with lipstick yelling at black students carrying their books, the anger of White people shouting at Black youth at the lunch counters. We saw Rustin kicked like a dog and beaten by police. Rustin was told to stay in place, and homosexual Identity was due to his mother abandoning him; he was imprisoned for conscientious objection; and accused of being a communist. How prejudiced were Friends during the civil disrest ? I remember in 1960s hearing many Quakers name-calling gays as perverts, So I appreciated how Rustin in all of his charismatic beauty, led me to recognize my own part in gulping whole hog racism and homophobia.

Why are we, Quakers, fighting for fairness, still enveloped by racism? Some of us grew up in the cocoon of Quaker Meeting while raised within the throes of the civil rights. Those of us born in or before 1960, knew of cities burning, schoolchildren getting hosed, vicious dogs and the school integration. Only a few Quakers in NEYM risked their lives by joining in the campaigns for integration and voting rights.

After the movie, people lingered some wrapped in Afghans on the sofa as the night settled deeper. Many impressions were shared. What about Bayard singing/dancing with the four King children? How beautiful the erotic love was depicted of Bayard and his lovers. Can you believe Bayard promised MLK that there would be 'no more (sexual) incidents?' The musical score by was excellent. It was riveting watching the tension between the Black leaders of the march: Roy Wilkins and MLK and Bayard Rustin. Edgar Medgers has a sweet role. John Lewis is seen reading the pledge that all attenders (250,000) were asked to sign. Clayton Powell was seen attacking Rustin for being gay and a detriment to the March on Washington. Powell called MLK (remember

it's a movie) the 'n' word. Ella Baker had a cameo performance in asking Rustin to forgive MLK. The movie had stunning moments and lots to chew on.

Many thought they'd leave early, but some of us wondered how were the Quakers mentioned? Rustin's identity as a Quaker came out early as he described talking to a young MLK about not carrying guns. Rustin spoke a lot about being raised by his Black Quaker grandmother. When Rustin said as a youth, I like dancing with boys more than girls, Rustin reports her response, "Now what am I supposed to do with that statement?" We looked at that ambiguity from a Quaker perspective. Ma Rustin, a Quaker and active with NAACP, voiced being perplexed (being in 1920s) without condemning Bayard or expecting him to become straight. Jonathan Borne voiced, "I sure wish I could have met her."

The Quaker minister and Rustin's boss AJ Muste was portrayed as a man wanting to squash Rustin's rage. He told Rustin to stay put at his desk, accusing him of acting out and being gay because he was abandoned by his Mom (raised by his Grandmother). A few women had cameo roles. And Ella Baker was shown as a peacemaker, and an elder for Bayard Rustin. It was powerful. Rustin left the prejudiced work space of the War Resisters League in 1963, to work on the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Rustin came out as a Quaker and a hero. The Quaker community was not part of the movie.

One woman of European descent, went to DC on Aug 27, 1963 sharing how eerie (and safe) it felt to have the entire city shut down (for whites), empty streets, and all the national security forces out as if there was a crime scene (and she got to meet Paul Newman). We all smiled.

I do feel that the movie depicted the creativeness and self-suffering as a NV activist. Rustin's words were passive resistance. His quotes, "We are all one—and if we don't know it, we will learn it the hard way. We need, in every community, a group of angelic troublemakers.

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