

FOOT SOLDIERS, from page 10

David Domke: The series is called "Marching to Selma," and so we're marching to Selma metaphorically through the lecture series, but I will be going to Selma: I'm taking 52 people on the next trip, and we're going to go in early March. It will end that week in Selma, which is the 50th anniversary of the Bloody Sunday march and the subsequent two marches after that. I knew that there would be massive national, international attention to the anniversary. So I knew because of Selma, because of the iconic nature of it, that this was a place that would capture the national attention.

Selma metaphorically, though, is where the roads converge. The roads converge from Montgomery, Ala., where Martin Luther King kind of led the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (a black Civil Rights-era group that grew out of the Montgomery Bus Boycot); the roads converge from Nashville with the national nonviolence movement; the roads converge from Birmingham; the roads converge from Mississippi. They all come to Selma. And what I mean by converging is the people, the ideas that made those spaces happen all make their way to Selma. For us to understand Selma, we have to go through these places.

So what Selma is to me is the end of a road. The road diverges from that point, the coalition begins to fracture in the Civil Rights Movement for all kinds of reasons: Vietnam, the rise of frustration among many African Americans and their split off from King's nonviolence model. But from '55 to '65, this coalition holds, and I think that we learn a lot by marching to Selma.

R.R.: You've seen "Selma."

D.D.: I've seen a cut of it. I'm pretty familiar with the debates that are going on around the film.

R.R.: What debates?

D.D.: Well, there's two. One is an internal debate about the Civil Rights Movement, which is how much credit does King deserve for Selma? There's a second debate, which is the portrayal of Lyndon Johnson and is this a fair portrayal? Johnson is seen (in the film) as wanting the Selma group to slow down, not to derail some of his other agenda items, and that portrayal is at odds with some other portrayals that he was moving the movement along. I don't think it's at odds. I think he was strongly moving the movement along from what he could do, but that he was getting pushed by the marchers, by the activists. It's probably less praising of Johnson than what might be factual reality, but at the same time, it is a corrective to put the energy and the credit on the activists. So if this film is part of putting the focus on those foot soldiers that were around King who did incredible things, too, they deserve attention.

R.R.: Talk about this term, "foot soldiers."

D.D.: It's a term used by the Civil Rights-era folks, a term I've picked up from them. It's people that showed up daily, people who organized behind the scenes, people who marched and got arrested but haven't made it into the history books. I've learned about them and met them and come to be awed by

them. But they're not in the mainstream texts, they're not in the textbooks that kids read. They're the organizers, they're the people that did the work, who marched every day, who showed up, who got arrested, who gave money, who sustained the movement, who built it, and then when King showed up to lead it — cause that's what he did everywhere: not to seize from them, but because he brought the media — the foot soldiers kind of receded into the background.

R.R.: Who's a foot soldier you are in awe of?

D.D.: There's several actually. Bernard Lafayette, Diane Nash, John Lewis: They're my three personal heroes right now.

R.R.: Tell us about one of them.

D.D.: Well, Bernard is 75 years old, and him and Nash and Lewis and Jim Bevel were the four key people in the national nonviolence movement. Bernard was from the South. They all were in Nashville, going to school; he became a Freedom Rider (and rode buses into parts of the segregated South), got beaten in Montgomery; then went into SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and told SNCC, "I want to go Selma to organize," and they said, "We don't send anybody to Selma, you can't do it." There was a red X on the map on Selma, and he said, "I'm going."

R.R.: Why wouldn't they send anyone there?

D.D.: Because it was so violent. It was considered the most hateful place, even worse than Mississippi. And that's why part of the movement goes there eventually, because they knew the confrontation would arise with Jim Clark, the sheriff there.

So (Bernard) goes, and he organizes, he gets arrested. He is part of the King group that leads the Poor People's Campaign in Chicago; he's there with King the day he dies in Memphis. And he takes with him King's mission to spread the message of nonviolence around the world. And he's been doing that ever since, it's what he does: He started the Institute for the Study and Practice of Nonviolence. So Bernard and I have gotten connected, and he's transferred some of that mojo, some of that spiritual determination that drove this movement to me. And that's a gift.

R.R.: So this was 50 years ago, and recently, we've been having protests here in cities across the United States about police brutality. Do you see any similarities?

D.D.: Well, of course. They're very much related. I'll say two things about the '50s and '60s. First of all, the critique of the current protests is that these folks are not organized or don't have leaders per se.

I don't buy either of those. I think they're really quite organized, and I think they have many leaders. What they don't have is spokespeople. "Spokespeople" is a little different than leaders. They do need to come up with spokespeople, not for their own sake but for those who want to talk to them and want to get messages from them.

What the Civil Rights Movement in the '50s and '60s did is they had these incredibly courageous, determined people. But they always identified who's going to be our spokesperson: Diane Nash was that person for the Freedom Riders; Bernard

Lafayette was that person in Selma; Martin Luther King Jr., when he arrived, would become that person. The current moment needs these spokespeople. They're emerging because there's all these incredibly smart, engaged people, but they're not there yet, and they certainly haven't been anointed by outside the movement.

The reality, though, is that in 1956, '57, '58, '59, '60, there really wasn't Martin Luther King the way we know Martin Luther King today. He had been a leader in the bus boycott and had been a spokesperson, but he doesn't become the Martin Luther King that we now remember until in '63 with Birmingham, when he holds that fragile coalition together through the police dogs and the fire hoses. So today, people say, "Why isn't there a King?" Well, because it's '55 or '56 in the parallels to today. It's not '64.

So the movement is building now, and it takes a number of years, it takes a series of events, it takes people, it takes the kind of work we're doing here in Seattle. That's what it takes.

There has been no march on Washington today; there have been some things that have happened, attention has been raised, but the movement has not gelled, it has not crystallized. There's no guarantee it will happen. But I think there are possibilities because of social media, because there is a lot of energy around this, because there is the sense that there is a broader white engagement with this that's helpful.

So I think that what we're seeing today is extremely valuable. I think it's been largely nonviolent. The imagery that's come out of Ferguson and New York, the protests around the country are actually far more advanced than anything you saw in '55, '56, '57 except for Montgomery. So I think we're early (in the new movement), we're not late.

R.R.: Is there any way to help the early stages of the movement, now that it's here?

D.D.: There is. Several of the people that were there in the '60s are still around. They need to get over what they did in the '60s and recognize it's a different time, it's a different place. It is not three television channels anymore. They have incredible wisdom and determination, and they need to transfer that. I expect that we'll have some kind of coming together nationally this year, a beginning of the older with the younger. That wisdom is important.

Also, to be very candid, people like myself, who are white men of power and privilege, who have the ability to have a tenured faculty position at a place like the UW, need to engage. And we are. It's not just white men, but people like me need to be engaged. The reality is that I know that I'm not the only one that's doing this kind of work. So I think it's happening.

Reprinted from Street Roots' sister paper, Real Change News in Seattle.

The imagery that's come out of Ferguson and New York, the protests around the country are actually far more advanced than anything you saw in '55, '56, '57 except for Montgomery. So I think we're early (in the new movement), we're not late.