

Funding What Is Important
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Tri-County Unitarian Universalists
Summerfield, FL
Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lake County
Eustis, FL
Rev. Cynthia A. Snavely

I have seen the pictures before. Two hundred thousand people on the mall in Washington, DC. Dr. King speaking from the Lincoln Memorial. What never occurred to me until a month or so ago was to ask, “Who paid for all this?” Who got the park permits? Who organized buses? Who bought protest sign materials?

What prompted me to consider those questions was a piece on the NPR show Fresh Air about a new book, [Our Secret Society: Mollie Moon and the Glamour, Money and Power Behind the Civil Rights Movement](#) by Tanisha Ford.

The piece noted that, “Moon's New York City parties attracted stars like Billie Holiday and Josephine Baker, as well as wealthy white donors, Black elites and working class Black people. But Moon faced criticism from activists who were skeptical of taking money from rich white liberals.

”What African Americans feared was that that kind of influence would then steer the movement away from the issues that African Americans cared about and ... toward issues that felt safe for white Americans,” Ford says.

“Ford notes that debates about money, influence and social justice are still relevant today. But, she adds, fundraising is a crucial — and often-overlooked — part of the Civil Rights Movement.

”I have found that once I started to turn my attention to the money, that this story humanizes these people even more, and it makes the stakes of movement building all the more clear,” Ford says.” [Fresh Air for Oct. 30, 2023: How Black socialite Mollie Moon raised millions for civil rights : NPR.](#)

I will be using many quotes from Ford’s book today. She writes,

“Spring 1963 ...”There was much to be done to help coordinate what would be called the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Fundraisers and grassroots organizers from every corner of the Black Freedom financial grid would have to coordinate ways to raise funds for buses, buy supplies for protest signs, buy food for sack lunches, and print program booklets, among other things. It would take every skill that money organizers like Mollie Moon had amassed over the long arc of the movement to pull off a successful and impactful march.”

But let me back up. Ford begins chapter one of the book in 1932. A lot had to happen to get to the point where Black Freedom organizations could pull off the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

Ford writes that, “Despite deep mistrust and threats of violent reprisals, those committed to the movement had to figure out a way to move money quickly across the country, to get it to cities and communities that needed it most. This is where Mollie Moon and Black American women fundraisers like her became indispensable to the movement. They were the glue that connected Black social clubs, church groups, sororities, fraternities, and professional organizations into a national network of contributors who gave of their time and money to keep the movement afloat.”

Mollie met Dorothy (Dot) West, a writer of the Harlem Renaissance, when she moved into the apartment building where West lived. West’s writer friends tended to be older than she so in connecting with Mollie Dot found a friend more her own age. Ford writes, “In befriending Dot, Mollie acquired a star-studded group of friends who were leaders of (what was called) the new Negro Movement, including Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, and Claude McKay.”

Eventually “Her community ... called upon her and the unique skill set she had been building as a social worker, public intellectual, and hostess with an address book of powerful and resourceful friends.”

“...she was well-connected. She knew every (black person) of import from New York to DC, Chicago and back, and even some wealthy whites. As a social worker, she was a keen observer of human behavior. She understood people’s motivations, their pleasures, and their needs. She could turn an abstract idea into a well-laid plan of action. At the time, many social workers were taking their professional skills and moving into public relations, foundation philanthropy, and NGOs. Mollie chose to use her skills to aid the Black Freedom struggle instead of working for a white organization if one would have hired her.”

Her first fundraiser was a cabaret dansant on June 16, 1940.

“The *Amsterdam News* dubbed Mollie and her Program Committee ‘the socialites,’ which gendered and trivialized their work. But all of those women understood that fundraising was a crucial part of the Black organizing tradition. Social justice movements floundered without strong financial backing. And not everyone could do this work. Master fundraisers had to be skilled and versatile....”

The book centers on Mollie Moon but there are also interesting stories of others involved in raising money for the cause.

One of the most interesting involves Harry Belafonte. “‘We’ve got a crisis on our hands down here,’ the man on the phone said. ‘We need help.’ ‘What do you need?’ Belafonte had asked SNCC leader James Forman, the man on the other end of the call. ‘At least fifty thousand dollars,’ Forman replied (the equivalent of nearly \$500,000 today). ‘How soon do you need it?’ Belafonte asked. He’d given money to SNCC (the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) in the past and had coordinated benefit concerts headlined by folks such as Nina Simone, Joan Baez, Dick Gregory, and the Kingston Trio. Forman told him, in no uncertain terms: ‘We’re

going to burn through the rest of our budget in seventy-two hours.’ Belafonte pledged to raise the money, and then get it from New York City to rural Mississippi, somehow, some way.”

Civil rights groups were being watched by the FBI as subversive organizations. Southern financial institutions were connected to White Citizens’ Councils. Getting the money to SNCC was not going to be easy.

“Belafonte instantly set about fundraising the \$500,000 so he could deliver the money to Mississippi in three days. He and his wife, Julie Belafonte, hosted a fundraiser (organized by Julie) at their Upper West Side apartment. Harry also flew to Montreal and Chicago to speak at in-home fundraisers organized by his friends—‘White guests bearing check books,’ as he described them. He was eventually able to raise nearly \$700,000, which he converted to small bills and placed in a suitcase. Belafonte enlisted his good friend, actor Sidney Poitier, to accompany him on this perilous journey to the Deep South. The two biggest Black celebrities in the world at the time took a commercial plane from Newark, New Jersey, to Jackson, Mississippi—unaccompanied by any security guards. Then they hopped on a tiny Cessna to a private landing strip in Greenwood, Mississippi, where they were met by SNCC volunteers, who drove them to an Elks Lodge on the outskirts of Greenwood, where a group of around a hundred SNCC volunteers were gathered. ‘When Sidney and I walked in, screams of joy went up from the crowd,’ Belafonte remembered.”

I knew that people risked their safety and their lives to work for civil rights, but I had not realized that they also risked their financial stability.

Ford writes, “Manhattan, Spring 1956 Mollie (Moon) was called into the Midtown Manhattan headquarters of the National Urban League for an emergency executive board meeting....Groups of influential white segregationists had applied pressure to local Community Chests across the South, threatening to stop making financial contributions if they continued to donate any of those monies to the Urban League or other civil rights organizations...Local National Urban League and NAACP affiliates had typically received sizable annual gifts from these pooled funds. But the NAACP’s victory in *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, which ruled racial segregation unconstitutional changed everything...Hardest hit were the Urban League affiliates in Little Rock, Arkansas; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Jacksonville, Florida.”

“The NAACP’s Legal Defense team’s 1954 victory in *Brown v. Board* was the culmination of numerous lawsuits that chipped away at Jim Crow on the city and state level. But the white backlash to the blow that had been struck against segregation and their white privilege was intense, especially in the South. White Citizens’ Councils (WCCs) began forming after the ruling... The White Citizens’ Councils understood that the way to apply real pressure to civil rights organizations was to strangle the money. They targeted anyone who was a known activist, as well as individuals and organizations that sympathized with the cause or donated money. Using their control of banks and other financial institutions, WCCs denied (black) farmers mortgages, withheld government food subsidies for the poor, cancelled car insurance policies, and threatened the pensions of local teachers.”

One of the ways the black freedom organizations responded was to work at cooperating in their fundraising and organizing. Because Mollie Moon had not just run big fundraising events but had also organized Women's Guilds of the National Urban League across the country, she had a network that was helpful to that fundraising, cooperation and coordination. Ford writes, "WCCs' widespread economic reprisals kicked off an economic crisis that continued well into the 1960s. Civic leaders had to strengthen the bonds between their organization's national headquarters and its local branch leaders, as well as across the various organizations. The NAACP, (National Urban League)NUL, (Congress of Racial Equality) CORE, National Council of Negro Women, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and the United Negro College Fund (UNCF) were at the center of this coalition. In 1957, Southern Christian Leadership Conference would be added to the mix.

"Black branches of the YMCA and YWCA were important players, as were Greek-letter Black fraternities and sororities. Masonic temples and other fraternal orders such as the Benevolent and Protective Order of the Elks were essential, as were the Order of the Eastern Star and the social clubs such as The Boulé, The Girlfriends, and The Links...An often overlooked organization in this matrix was the American Bridge Association (ABA), which since 1948 had been led by Victor Daly... a civic leader deeply committed to racial justice...The ABA pledged thousands of dollars it raised each year from its annual national tournament- which attracted upward of ten thousand (blacks) from across the country (who were then connected) – to the NAACP, (National Urban League)NUL, (Congress of Racial Equality) CORE, and UNCF (the United Negro College Fund).

"Black women across the rural South...coordinated bake sales and fish fries to raise money for local efforts. Drawing from the strategies that had paid for new church roofs and school supplies, they were now using their fundraising skills to fund bail campaigns and voter registration drives..."

"In this moment, Mollie Moon and the National Council of Urban League (Women's) Guilds became indispensable, helping the NUL raise money, build strong interracial alliances, and sustain its relationships with other (black) organizations."

"The most prominent women of the Guild... were well-networked within and beyond the NUL and had strong relationships with local television, radio and print media, access to capital, and close relationships with local and state government officials."

Those women were not the face of the civil rights movement, but Ford and others are working to bring them forward and recognize them today. They thought the work was important enough to fund, and they threw themselves into the work of raising those funds.

We are in the midst now of raising funds for this congregation. Many of you are here because you were looking for like-minded people committed to the same values and the same social change as you are. Keeping this community together and committed takes funding. Organizing with others to do that work takes funding. We need your time and your talent. There is no denying that. But we also need your funds. As you consider your pledge to this congregation and its work this Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday weekend think of those in the civil rights

movement who made sure that the work could be done by raising and giving money for the cause.

No one in the civil rights movement could do everything but many people did something and so I end with a meditation by Unitarian Universalist minister Jan Taddeo on choosing your three things..

“The storm outside echoes the storm raging within my soul.

“So many people in need... so much pain, so much grief.

“Too many causes and campaigns fill my mailboxes, sap my energy, beg for my money.

“Three things I must do...only three things? You've got to be kidding—which three do I choose?

“Books and letters, magnets and movies implore me to dance as if no one is watching learn seven habits and make four agreements give generously, vote often, express myself!

“Yet hundreds, thousands, millions live with hunger and thirst, in poverty, enduring violence, and disease. Did Mother Teresa, Martin and Ghandi cry out with despair from the darkness of overwhelm? What three things did they choose?

“Three things. Three things we must do. Is it to act in kindness, serve justice, love God and your neighbor even as you love yourself.

“But where do I start?

“So much thoughtlessness, hatred and fear. Too little justice, too much selfishness. Where is God? Who is my neighbor?

“Three things...seven principles, ten commandments, twelve steps... all number of things speak to us; and yet, we must choose.

“We must choose to do something, so three things may be the right number...not too few, not too many. But which three things shall I do? Will you do?”

“Here's an adage I've always liked:
Don't just do something, stand there.
Stand in the surf, or sit on a rock, or lay your body across the earthy loam...and be quiet.

“Very quiet.

“Do you hear it? That still small voice, the echo of your soul, reverberating with the call to your own true self to emerge.

“Then the calm within becomes the calm without.
The storm blows over, the sun recovers its position of strength,
And that glorious symbol of hope and unity emerges across the sky.

“At the end of this rainbow, a treasure...
the three things you must do:

“Go outside yourself and know the needs of the world.

“Go within and discover your Life-given gifts.

“Then arch yourself like a rainbow bridge between the two and create a more beautiful world.”

Ford, Tanisha. *Our Secret Society: Mollie Moon and the Glamour, Money, and Power Behind the Civil Rights Movement*, HarperCollins.