



Video Story Transcript

I'M GONNA LET IT SHINE-IT'S IN ALL OF US

By: Storyteller Bill Harley
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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2lkRZzgGHtw>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hi, my name is Bill Harley. I'm a storyteller and a songwriter and an author now but before I was that, I was a community organizer and I was also a nonviolence trainer. I, uh, learned how to, uh, train people for, uh, demonstrations and, uh, civil disobedience and also work in the classroom.

Uh, and because of that, uh, when I was working with those organizations, American Friends Service Committee and other organizations, I had the opportunity to work with a lot of people who had been involved in the civil rights movement. Um, I was lucky enough to get to meet a lot of people who had worked with Dr. King: Walter Fautroy and Bernard Lafayette and John Lewis; uh, even lucky enough to meet Coretta Scott King and, uh, Dr. King's father, Daddy King.

And along with that, during that process, uh, I learned a lot of freedom songs, uh, from the civil rights movement: "I'm Gonna Let It Shine," "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around," uh, "Hold On," "Keep Your Eyes on the Prize." All those songs and I began to sing them with people; I used them as organizing tools myself. Uh, and listening to Pete Seeger's 1963 concert, to this great recording of freedom songs recorded in Carnegie Hall so I kind of cut my teeth on those songs. When Martin Luther King's birthday became a national holiday, I was concerned, uh, because those songs and that movement of nonviolence and what his work was that had such a huge influence to me, that it was really a national holiday. It wasn't parochialized into like, okay, this is the black holiday, 'cause I really want it to be our holiday. So, I decided I was going to have a freedom sing at my house. And we invited about 25, 30 people musicians, not musicians, people who like to sing and we sang songs for about two hours. And it was there in the middle of January, that the room was steamy and we were singing songs and it was just great. I felt like we raised the house off the foundations so we did that for year after year.

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And then, um, a rabbi at a local synagogue asked us if we would do it there. And we ended up, for a number of years, having four or five hundred people come. And it was so good, it was so powerful, I decided that I wanted to make a recording of this... of these songs, not in a formal, uh, performance setting but just to put a bunch of people together and sing them so that they would be sing able for other people.

And I started to ask my friends if they would sing on this recording and they said, Of course,” uh, but I was concerned. I wanted it to be everybody. I wanted it to be black and white together not being black or white but also brown. There's more and more Hispanic folks in our area. Um, and so, I started to call... reach out to people in my community of different, uh, different backgrounds.

And then I called up Guy Carawan. Guy, uh, just died, um, several months ago and he was a white guy from California but he came to the south and became, uh, involved in the movement. He was a music director for years and years at the, uh, Highlander Center where people came to learn how to organize. And Guy, along with Pete Seeger brought “We Shall Overcome” to the movement and “I'm Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table.” And so, I called Guy up and I said, “Guy, I'm thinking about doing this. I'm trying to figure out who to invite.

And he said, “Well, why don't you just invite the original people.

And I said, “Really!”

He said, “Yeah, here's a list of names. Here's a... here's a bunch of people. The Freedom Singers, this quartet of, of, uh, young black people that went around, traveled the country raising money for Freedom Summer and all those things. And here's some people who were sneak organizers and here's a woman who was very close to Dr. King. Why don't you just call them up? They can all sing. Just ask them.”

Which was kind of overwhelming 'cause I really was a white... a young white guy from the south who had no business doing that, except that I thought it was important and I wanted them to make them our songs. So, I did. I just sucked it up and started to make one phone call after another and almost all of them said, “Yeah, we'll come.”

I said, “We can pay your way. We'll make sure you have good food. And they said they would come, which is quite a testament to them because there's really an issue of cultural appropriation about these songs.

There's a question about whose songs are these. And it's a legitimate question but I wanted it... to make it a bigger tent. And I talked WGBH in Boston into bringing their mobile recording unit down to this retreat center in Rhode Island. I got them to do it for free. I talked to all these people and we took a second mortgage out of our house to pay for this recording and I was way over my head. And I called Guy up. I said, “I've got all these people comin'.”

And he said, “You do?”

I said, Uh huh.”

He said, “Well, that's going to be interesting!”

And I didn't know exactly what he meant until everybody came there and I realized I had bitten off a lot more than I could chew. First of all, all these people who had been involved in the movement who I only heard of (and I done all my background work on them and gospel music and the history of the movement), they came with their own stories. And there were a lot of unresolved stories there. And then my friends, many of them

from the north came and many of them were white and some were people of color – Hispanic and African-American or mixed, whatever, you know, te, whatever we all are.

And that first meal, the first rule in organizing is make sure the food is good. And I had a great caterer and that calmed that placed down. And we immediately had a problem with the recording area because what I wanted was wrong. And we decided we had to do it in a barn but the barn wasn't heated so I had to go out and get all these heaters to bring in, to heat up the barn.

But everybody looked at each other because this was the past and the present meeting each other. And black and white meeting each other and north and south meeting each other and we were all nervous. Now I've been an organizer long enough to know I needed to int... to figure out a way to introduce this. And so, at the end of the meal, I had everybody sit on the floor. There's probably maybe 30 of us all together including the engineers and everybody and I said, "I want to go around the circle. And I want you to introduce yourself and say one thing, uh, one of your hopes and one of your fears. And it was really awkward.

Uh, the, the white folks, um, were afraid of doing the wrong thing and saying the wrong thing and afraid of being misunderstood and, uh, the, the black folks were scoping people out. Was this just another, uh, incident in which white people were tryin 'to make 'em feel good about something'? And what are they going to do with these songs? Uh, and then I had some friends, uh, from the north, some African-American friends from the north, who were kind of in between, watching all of this go on. And none of us knew what was going to happen. And people were very polite when we are going around the circle and they were saying things to be safe. But that's no way to sing freedom songs and trying to make sure that you didn't make any mistakes is not the way to do what's right. And we... I could feel the tension in the room rising and thinking, "This is beyond myself. This is beyon...; I can't fix this."

And then it was Hollis Watkins' turn and Hollis, um, oh, he's probably 50 then, I guess. And he was in his early 20s in the early 60s. He was a sneak organizer; he's from southern Mississippi. Uh, he was one of the last people to see Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney, uh, before they drove off in a car and, uh, were killed by the Ku Klux Klan. And he said, uh, to me, "I told them not to go!"

And Hollis is to this day, an organizer, uh, in Jackson, Mississippi. Not the best singer but maybe the most moral person there. And when he came..., when it came to his time, he said, "Well, here's my fear. My fear is that we're not going to admit that we're racist. And someone this weekend is going to say something that's hurtful and has racism in it. And then when someone calls him on it, they're going to deny it because they're say, "I'm not a racist. And then we're not going to get anywhere and we're just going to draw lines and we won't get through what we've got to get to. So, what I want us all to admit right now is that we are racist." He said, "How could we not be. Look where we've been raised. Everybody in this room doesn't want to be. We're all here because we don't want to be but we are. It's not who we want to be but we need to admit it. And then when we admit it, we can get past it."

And you could feel everyone in that room breathe. That, suddenly, the black folks who had brought so much and were... and their lives have been endangered. I realized later, that those people, really, in a sense, had post-traumatic shock that they had been through this cathartic moment in their lives when they're very young and some of 'em had never... that was the moment of their lives. But that opened and there was this huge relief for us for, for someone like me, that I might make a mistake but that shouldn't keep me from trying. And we did make mistakes. I made huge mistakes during that weekend but somebody said, "Bill, that's not right."

I remember every... somebody said in a recording, "That sounds like church!"

And I said, "This is not about church!"

And they all looked at me. Well, their understanding of what church was and mine was, you know, being raised a white Methodist in the, the, you know, white denomination. Those are two different things. Church meant yeah!

And it took us a long time but we got through it all. There was one moment because I had asked... It was during the anti-apartheid movement, I'd asked a South African poet to come and teach us a couple South African freedom songs. And there, it was like 9 o'clock on a Saturday night in this barn. He taught us "Senzenina," which is, uh, why am I treated like... this way because of the color of my skin. It's like a prayer. (*Singing*) Senzenina, senzenina, senzenina. Senzenina. And all of us there were working in this space together learning a new thing, learning a new way to be, learning a song that none of us know.

And that had a huge effect on me when I realized that I could drop this notion of I'm not racist. I can say, "I don't want to be and I'm better at it but I don't hold that up anymore."

And as soon as we say that I'm not racist, we're forced to defend our behavior. But what we can say is, "Yeah, I am. It's in me but it's not who I want to be. How are we going to get through this together?"