

## The Lost Is Found

The story of how this interview with Bayard Rustin came to happen and how it came to be posted here for you to read or listen to is truly remarkable...I can only attribute it to extreme providence.

During the early 1980s, while producing a newly-formed quarterly magazine *Open Hands* as a resource for Reconciling Congregations and other LGBTQ-affirming ministries, I regularly searched for content to fit the theme assigned to each issue. The theme for the Spring 1987 issue was homosexuality in communities of color. During the preceding months, I noticed an article in *The Washington Blade* about Bayard Rustin speaking at a rally for LGBTQ rights in New York. I recognized his name immediately-- Bayard Rustin was a pillar of the Civil Rights Movement and had engineered the March on Washington in 1963. While he had not been a public advocate for LGBTQ justice in the past, reports of his same-gender orientation had served as ammunition for his critics. This news appeared to indicate that Rustin was now willing to be out in public. As a big dreamer, I thought—let's try to get an interview with Rustin for the magazine. Such a high-profile person would certainly get us some notice.

I tracked down an address for Rustin as the executive for the A. Philip Randolph Institute in Manhattan and mailed a letter requesting an interview. Within days, an envelope appeared in my mail which I eagerly opened to read that he had agreed to the interview. (I still wonder why Rustin agreed to an interview with a novice reporter representing an unknown periodical.) I called his office and made an appointment for February 2<sup>nd</sup> with his secretary, Walter Naegle. Living in Washington, D.C. at the time, I then spent time in the Library of Congress reading all that I could about Rustin's life and work to prepare for the interview.

On the interview morning, I boarded an early train to New York City and proceeded by subway to an old office building near Union Square. Anxious excitement was my traveling companion, as I had never conducted an interview before, much less with a renowned Civil Rights leader. The story that I wanted to get was about his life and experience as a gay man, but I did not know how open and honest he would be about this aspect of his life.

The office comprised two rooms—a small outer office with his secretary (whom I later learned was Rustin's life-partner) and an inner office with a large wooden desk behind which sat this affable, bow-tied, white-haired gentleman. When he greeted me, I noticed his speech was delivered with an accent that was perhaps Continental or Caribbean. I set up my portable

cassette recorder and proceeded with my questions. Almost immediately I was greatly relieved to hear him openly talk about his life as a gay man from his very early years and how that experience was woven through his life as a public figure and advocate for social change. When the interview concluded ninety minutes later, I knew I had captured a conversation of great historical value.

What a thrill it was for me to occupy the same space and listen to this iconic figure. Upon returning to DC, I set about to transcribe the interview myself--using a typewriter and continually pressing STOP/REWIND/PLAY on the cassette recorder. It was laborious ... I edited the interview a bit for length and it was published in the Spring 1987 issue of *Open Hands*. Our small circulation sold out. As I had suspected, we garnered a lot of positive feedback for the Rustin interview.

A few months later I was saddened to read that Rustin had died. And I also realized we had a recording of one of the few—if not the only--instances of Rustin speaking openly as a gay man. I shared this recording with my friend John D'Emilio, who used it in preparing his epic Rustin biography, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin*.

Somehow in the years that followed, I lost track of the cassettes. I forgot who I had loaned them to, and they did not return them to me. I agonized over having lost this valuable historical treasure and tried hard to figure out what I had done with them. But, alas, they were gone. The one saving grace was that the LGBTQ Religious Archives Network (LGBTQ-RAN) had acquired the complete run of the now-defunct *Open Hands* magazine in digital form and posted that on its website. So, this interview was available to read, albeit it not easy to find.

Fast forward to a little over a year ago when LGBTQ-RAN staff colleague Riot Mueller mentioned that she was studying Bayard Rustin for a seminary class. I told her about the existence of the 1986 interview and where she could find it. Riot found the openness of the interview impressive and shared it with her professor and class, who received it enthusiastically. Ironically this reminded me of my torment over the loss of the recording.

LGBTQ-RAN board member Brendan Fay was aware of the soon-to-be-released major film about Rustin and encouraged us to think of how we could recognize his legacy on our website. In a fall 2023 staff planning meeting we agreed to focus one of our monthly educational webinars on Rustin in early 2024. As I was pondering whom to invite to present for the webinar, Brendan informed me that Walter Naegle was still living and was dedicated to preserving Rustin's legacy. I concurred with Brendan that

Walter could likely speak more personally and thoughtfully about Bayard than anyone else.

Brendan supplied Walter's email address and I sent off an email that opened: *Brendan Fay gave me your contact information. Actually you and I met way back in the winter of 1987 when you welcomed me to your office at the A. Philip Randolph Institute where I interviewed Bayard for Open Hands magazine. I think Brendan sent you a copy of that interview. I think that was another lifetime for both of us...*

A few days later, I received an email response from Walter that included: *I remember you well. I do have the original publication in my files and also an audio recording of the interview.* My heart leapt and I went back to read his words again carefully. This was totally unexpected...a copy of the long-lost recording was found!

Walter graciously agreed to arrange for the cassette tapes to be digitized so we could post the recording of Rustin speaking—along with a transcript of the complete interview—here on the LGBTQ-RAN website. Now you--as well as interested persons and colleagues for years to come--have the opportunity to experience firsthand the words and story of this seminal gay forebearer and change agent.

Mark Bowman, April 2024