



# The CommUUnicator

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## An Unsung Hero of Civil Rights

By Clint Nicely

Medgar Evers, Rosa Parks, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. These and many other individuals are the most often-celebrated leaders of the Civil Rights Movement through some of the most turbulent decades of the last century. But the history of the movement is filled with hundreds of lesser-known activists. Among the most influential and significant figures not always in the spotlight is **Bayard Rustin**.



On February 12, 1909, the NAACP was born, not coincidentally, on the centennial of Abraham Lincoln's birth. Just three years later, Bayard Rustin was born in Pennsylvania, where his early life and youth were greatly influenced by his activist Quaker grandmother Julia, an early member of the NAACP. As a youth, he came to know W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson and many other such luminaries. It is little surprise, given such a pedigree, that Rustin would become a key figure in the Civil Rights Movement. His accomplishments and

involvements are far too numerous to list here, but he was a key advisor and Chief of Staff to Martin Luther King, and he was the primary architect of the 1963 March on Washington. His influence on MLK was unmatched by any other; indeed, in 1948, Rustin arranged to study under Gandhi in India. And though Gandhi was assassinated before he arrived, Rustin learned the philosophy and "techniques of nonviolent civil resistance from leaders of the Gandhian movement." It was Rustin who taught Dr. King the philosophy of nonviolence, an ideal which King fully adopted and promoted completely. We can only speculate what the 1960s and beyond might have been like without the influence of Bayard Rustin.

Some have wondered why Rustin, a major player in all the Civil Rights Movement's activities throughout the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and of course beyond, didn't assume more of a public presence; the answer is the perfect embodiment of dedication to cause over self. As a gay man, Rustin knew that public scrutiny of his sexuality might distract from the cause he so believed in, and, therefore, he chose to remain largely behind the scenes, often even anonymous in numerous publications and important activities. Rustin realized at an early age that he was gay, and his grandmother encouraged him to be himself. He found the same acceptance and support from most of those in his orbit, but he knew that a low personal profile would mean a

better likelihood of success for the greater cause: personal sacrifice for public good.

In recent decades, more understanding and accepting public attitudes have led to a greater awareness of the import of Bayard Rustin's influence. Community centers, justice centers, libraries, and schools throughout the country bear his name—even in London, The Bayard Rustin Room, honoring the nonviolent and pacifist influences of his Quaker background, is the pride of The Friends House. In 2013, Rustin was honored posthumously with the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Barack Obama.

Herein, we have barely scratched the surface of the importance of Bayard Rustin, but his determination, his selfless dedication, and his courage in the face of adversity may well prove a good example for us all in these uncertain times. Rustin was not a Unitarian Universalist, but he was the next best thing, a Quaker. Indeed, the parallels and similarities between the UU principles and the tenets of Quakerism are almost indistinguishable. With love as an anchoring quintessence, the concepts of Dignity, Justice, Equity, Acceptance, Truth and Respect, among others are essential cornerstones of both faith systems. Rustin's example of self-sacrifice in favor of a higher purpose serves as an excellent reminder, during this Black History Month and beyond, that we as UUs must be unrelenting in our support and pursuit of acceptance and social justice for all.

*Sources for this article include The Encyclopedia of African American History, Bayard Rustin's Civil Rights Legacy, and Rev. Robert Murphy, UU Minister (Florida).*

## New Member Welcome



The congregation formally welcomed five new UUFW members during the service on February 2. Pictured from left to right are Victor Monti, Ben Blankenship, Amy Goodloe, Cynthia Eckles and Cal Hauptle. Let's all help them fully integrate into the life of our community.

