



# Founding a Peoples College

RAYMOND W. HOUGHTON \*

**M**Y mother-in-law, Mrs. Bradbury, was one of the finest ladies I have ever known. She used to talk with Professor H. H. Benjamin of Mary Stuart, née Stewart, and of King Henry, and Ann, and of the later Jacobites in Scotland, of Bonnie Prince Charlie and the MacDonalds and the Camerons.

Professor Benjamin knew of them well and they sat long evenings in my house and in her house and laughed and debated and instructed one another. I could but listen in my ignorance. Mrs. Bradbury, an orphan in "the old country," had perhaps a sixth-grade education and a lifetime in the mills of Pawtucket.

"Annie, why don't you go to the college and take some courses in English history?"

"Oh, shush! I'm too old for that and they'd never let me in."

And she was right for the most part. But why not a peoples university, I wondered. They have them in Scandinavia and they have free universities around the world in Spain and in Germany and in places in America, even.

I often thought of starting one, and did, after a fashion, in my church—a Freewill Baptist university for about fifteen adults—but that was all.

When Martin Luther King was murdered I lay awake asking what could be done. Nothing, probably, but the next day I spoke

to Irving Fain about it and to Luke Fears about it. I saw Luke at a memorial service in his church. He and the Bishop invited me to talk to the parishioners about a free university in the inner city of Providence. Irving spoke to the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of State Colleges in Rhode Island. On the following Wednesday, the day Martin Luther King was buried, we presented the following idea to the full Board:

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## The Problem

Martin Luther King is dead and the world will never be the same. It might be worse, and probably will. It might, through some miracle, be better. To hope, to aspire is as human as to sustain despair.

## The McLuhan Message

Marshall McLuhan has reminded us that we have evolved to a new tribalism. Once more his vision was made manifest as one of our tribal esteemed was snatched away in the midst of our global village and the word was instantaneously received in our electric age living rooms. The event shattered the already uneasy expectancy of an already traumatic week. The murder of a

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president five years ago had prepared us well; but our vast experience with murder and violence, real in Dallas and Southeast Asia, fictional on the Ponderosa and Route 66, has not fully conditioned us to casual acceptance.

And the response is immediate. "Wud ya think of that, Ma? J.F.K. and M.L.K. I wonder when they'll play the reruns of the original? Maybe we'll get an Easter spectacular on the Hallmark Hall of Fame."

The President responded, and the *Manchester Guardian* responded, and other global chieftains shared their grief in glorious color before the evening was out and the omnipresent eye shrunk to sleep till *Today*.

It matters little whether the world was always as violent, whether conflict was always as encompassing, or whether the new media age simply keeps us more immediately reminded. Whether we are on the verge of self-extinction, or whether our self-view makes it appear that we might as well be, does not change the horrendous vision.

### **A Challenge**

The voices have been speaking but we haven't chosen to listen. Whitney Young told us once more at 1:17 a.m. on the morning of April 5. The time for talk has run out. Positive, decisive, and immediate action must be taken. And he was speaking of more than absurd racial divisiveness. He was speaking of the moral posture of all mankind.

### **On Ideas**

But ideas die aborning. For ideas by their very nature tend to be self-indicting. They infer that all is not right with the world. They cry out for change and in our overpowering insecurity with collective thumbs in collective mouths, we say, "God, no! Never change! We're insecure enough already!"

For ideas beget change and change begets anxiety. And anxiety begets immobility. And the beat goes on.

We do not change because we do not want to change. Our security is in our established institutionalized arrangements.

But if the trauma of a wrenching event has the force to drive us into true existential despair, perhaps, just perhaps, we may dare to confront with an idea.

Mankind is self-consciously inquisitive. Man tends to wonder about himself and others and the environment he lives in. Society has found it simpler, more efficient, though hardly effective, to create an educational bureaucracy to teach him what it wants him to know about what he wants to know.

Mankind has a naïve, though often unfounded, faith in the institution of education. Man believes in it although it has not made him what he might devoutly hope to be. It has provided many with creature comforts but not morality. It has given him means of survival and brought him to the brink of destruction. But he tends to seek education and to pay for the institutions he desperately hopes will provide it. In its bureaucratized imperfection it tends to disappoint. For while some seem to profit (more materially than spiritually; the proportion of saints is hardly burgeoning), others find it disappointing if not downright impossible. We have not succeeded yet in establishing truly humane institutions of learning.

### **The Plan**

It is in the spirit of trying again that the notion is proposed for the establishment of the Martin Luther King Center for Higher Education of the Rhode Island State College System. The King Center would be an inner city experimental collegiate project established in the City of Providence to provide education toward humanness for citizens of the state.

### **Facilities**

The plan for such a project would be relatively simple and at the same time infinitely complex. It would be the proposal to lease a tenement building in the inner city, and to renovate it to contain space for an office, an assembly hall, several classrooms, meeting rooms, studios, a media area, a paperback bookstore, a lounge, and study carrels.

### **Staff**

There would be need to hire a full-time director, an assistant director, a secretary, a clerk, a librarian/media specialist, a technician, and a custodian. There would be, in addition,

a part-time staff of educational counselors and instructors to be recruited from the university, the college, and the junior college.

### *Curriculum*

All courses in the center would be developed from the themes: Who am I? What am I? Where am I? What is the world like? Whom do I live with? What has happened here? What is our mythology? What are our inventions (communicative, economic, political, theological, philosophical, sociological, psychological)? What are our manifestations? What do we say? How have we said it (art, music, literature)? How do we survive (architecture, medicine)? What does it mean to be human?

There would be no permanent courses and no fixed curriculum. Professors would invent courses, and students would invent courses based on their mutual questions and their individual conceptions of the world.

In as far as would be possible, data, pure data, would be fed by technology. Media would be used as far as possible to transmit basic cognitive knowledge. Moving pictures, television, tapes, recordings, radio, and periodicals would provide a multi-media approach to knowing. It would be the function of teachers to interpret, question, discuss, counsel, and guide learning. Such courses would be based on ideas.

Other courses and seminars would be based on men. It would be possible to take a course on John Chafee or William Miller, or Dennis Roberts or Francis Madeira or Fr. Henry Sheldon or Ed Brown or Jim Williams. Seminars might last a week, a month, or three months.

Other seminars might invite regional or national figures to come to Rhode Island for a week at a time to share themselves with the King Center and the other state colleges.

Courses would have no fixed schedules. There would be no marks and no fixed credits.

### *Branching*

As individual weaknesses are diagnosed in students, a concept of academic branching would be instituted whereby new group and individual courses and study would be produced such as reading, writing, speaking, listening, group leadership, community research, cross-ethnic, racial, and social class experiences. (What are upper class people really like?)

The community could become the classroom. All of Rhode Island, all the world would be the resource material for the center. Museums, galleries, industry, schools, moving picture theatres, Trinity Square Playhouse, Veterans Auditorium, the docks, the bay, the cities, the airport would all be the environment for learning.

It might be that any course invented by anyone might be offered if it had takers. Anyone in the state might well be a volunteer counselor for someone who wants to know what the counselor might be able to share.

It could be that the center could creatively become the place where anyone could come to learn anything he wishes to know, any skill, any knowledge, any understanding, any attitude, any feeling. It might become an educational brokerage house putting people in touch with people, sharing what they mutually know.

### *A Peoples College*

In short, the Martin Luther King Center would be *A Peoples College*. It should be truly a college where what would be taught would be taught at the highest level of meaning, much in the way that agriculture became a sophisticated field of study within the land grant college movement.

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## **The College Opens**

The Board, in the emotion of the moment, bought the idea and sent it to a committee to study. The most difficult part was to convince the academic community. After two months of dialogue, an intercollegiate committee recommended that the idea be tried.

From the beginning the community was involved. Begrudgingly, at first, the academic community began to work with the inner city community. Charles Fortes, a local community organizer and former National Maritime Union official, William Lopes, a young recent college graduate, Iola Mabray, a housewife, Mr. Fears, a gospel choir director, Ernest Costa, a bartender, and scores of others in the city worked to develop the plan, to build a "non-curriculum," to recruit students, to raise money (for while the Board

endorsed the plan, it could provide no money).

The Chancellor of State Colleges in Rhode Island, Lawrence Dennis, worked tirelessly to help. Faculty members from eight colleges in Rhode Island volunteered their services.

On October 7, 1968, after incredible difficulties, the Urban Educational Center of Rhode Island opened its doors with packing boxes stacked all around, without books, furniture, blackboards—nothing but students who came to learn and to teach and teachers who came to teach and to learn.

In January, after a nationwide search, Mr. Hercules M. Porter came to replace this writer as director, and by June six students had earned a one-year diploma.

The UEC was two years old in October 1970. Over 300 students had been served by the center. It had run seminars for public school teachers. Its staff had worked with

the courts, with public agencies, and with the schools. Its students served with faculty, administrators, and community members to form a council which runs the school.

All is not as had been planned. This writer is dismayed by the formality which has come over the center, although it scarcely resembles a traditional college. The courses are not quite as divergent as this writer had hoped. While it has served and has been served by radical militants, delinquents, drop-outs, old people, and young people, it still does not fully serve the disaffected community known as really "hard core."

But it's still there. It's still run by the community. It's still largely black in outlook and attitude although whites come and are, for the most part, welcome.

UEC is not an invention for all cities. Providence needs other kinds of UEC's. But Providence already has one. Most cities do not. □

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# ETHNIC MODIFICATION OF THE CURRICULUM

**Maxine Dunfee** *Professor of Education, Indiana University*

Report of an ASCD-sponsored conference which studied the need for immediate curriculum evaluation and revision in terms of a pluralistic society.

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