



Maurice McCrackin: A Ministry of Love and Paradox
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I first met Maurice McCrackin in the late Winter or Spring of 1971 in the Allen County Court House in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. A college friend of mine, Larry Anderson, was sentenced that day to a lengthy stay in a Federal Penitentiary because he publicly refused to register for the draft and go to war in Vietnam. Mac was there to offer his love and support to my friend who was frightened about his prospects in a prison. Having been a prisoner of conscience himself, Mac was uniquely qualified to be Larry's confessor and counselor. We were all saddened, but Mac and his friend Ernest Bromley offered only upbeat words of hope and strength for Larry, which is way more than any of us could muster at this turning point in our friend's life. I found it strangely odd that these two eccentric gentlemen in their late 60's from Cincinnati were even there for our friend, but I later found out that both Ernie and Mac had been communicating with Larry for a while. They were part of a network called Peacemakers that provided support for draft resisters all over the country. Ernie's own son, Dan, was serving time in the same prison to where Larry was headed for the same reason and McCrackin, a veteran of social protest, knew all too well the loneliness faced by the individual when being punished by the state. Little did I know then that these two sextegenarians would play a central role in my life after we moved to Cincinnati less than 10 years later.

That vignette was signature McCrackin. If someone somewhere was paying a price for an act of conscience or just in a crisis he somehow always made contact in person, by phone, or by letter. It was an act of fidelity for Mac. It didn't matter if the person he reached out to was a convicted killer, a draft resister, or a congregation member he kept fidelity with that person. He instinctively knew that when people are in crisis they need the presence of someone who deeply cares about them as a human being because that is the only way for them to stay in touch with their own humanity. That was the first lesson I learned from Mac. We all can make a difference in the world one person at a time by treating that person as if

they are the most important person in the world. In other words, we change the world by simply caring. I had the honor of assisting in the sorting of Mac's personal effects for archival purposes and what struck me was the fact that he kept every letter every prisoner ever wrote to him and each prisoner had his or her own file in his multiple filing cabinets. In the course of his lifetime Mac regularly corresponded with several hundred prisoners from all over the country. Many would show up at his doorstep once they were released or even if they escaped.

This personal touch was also how he pastored his congregations at the West Cincinnati-St. Barnabas Church and at the Community Church of Cincinnati. He never seemed to miss the important life events of any of his congregants unless he was in jail, and even then he somehow would get word out to members he knew needed him. When our daughters had surgeries Mac was waiting in the lobby of the hospital before we even arrived. And that was even true when he no longer drove a car. He made it to the births, the parties, and the tragedies in everyone's lives. It was as though he was omnipresent and virtually everyone who knew him felt as though he was their best friend because he touched people on such a meaningful and personal level. He listened deeply and patiently and ministered to people often in silence for he knew that what people truly wanted was the presence of someone who cared enough to simply share time with them. Being in the presence of Mac in that way was like being in the presence of the power and the energy that drives the universe. For me, and so many others, that best personified what I considered to be the Love of God. To sit with Mac and drink hot chocolate with a donut was a sacred activity. He loved junk food like that but it was the holiest of communions to which anyone could ever partake. His ministry was truly a ministry of love. But there was more to Maurice McCrackin than just this ministry of love.

Mac recognized that love of humanity unconnected to a social and political consciousness of change, reform, and, yes, even revolution was an empty love. As someone who lived his life as an imitation of Jesus he knew that his love demanded that he work for social and political change. He worked for a change that would free people from the bondage of poverty and oppression so they could live lives of wholeness instead of brokenness. That wholeness for Mac was how he envisioned the Kingdom of God. Only when we are restored to our wholeness can we truly experience what Mac saw as the love of God.

Early on in his religious journey Mac embraced the Social Gospel as espoused by Sherwood Eddy, Kirby Page, Harry Emerson Fosdick, Jane Addams, Eugene Debs, and Norman Thomas. Eddy and Page influenced Mac through the Student Volunteer Movement of the International YMCA. Politically they both were socialists at that time and Page became a leader in the Fellowship of

Reconciliation, an organization that Mac joined in 1927 at the age of 22. Fosdick was the dean of American Liberal Theology and the first pastor of the Riverside Church in New York City. Mac kept volumes of Fosdick's sermons on his bookshelf and in reading through his sermons (Mac typed and saved every sermon he ever delivered from 1927 to 1987) you can tell the influence Fosdick had. Mac was filled with the optimism of the social gospel movement and he truly believed that committed Christians could be a beacon of hope in a dark world. While in Seminary he crossed paths with Jane Addams and did a few volunteer stints at Hull House while in Seminary. This experience proved to be extremely important for Mac because his settlement house work in Chicago carried through to his work in Cincinnati as he converted the St. Barnabas Church building into the Findlay Street Neighborhood House. The socialist politics grounded in the work of social justice espoused by Debs and Thomas also left its mark. Mac remembered he was 14 years old when Eugene Debs went to prison for his opposition to World War I and he was 15 when Debs ran for president from the Socialist Party while still in Prison. He also remembered the time he heard Norman Thomas give a speech in Chicago. Thomas was electrifying and it left a deep impression about how great oratory can move people. My first of many road trips with Mac was a 1982 Pilgrimage we took to Eugene Debs's home in Terre Haute, Indiana. Neither of us had been there before and it was like visiting a religious shrine for the both of us.

But how does this all connect to the power of paradox? Mac's commitment to social change was rooted in his religious understanding of Jesus' message and mission on earth. He had a strong Presbyterian upbringing with his mother, Elizabeth, and Aunt, Mary, raising him along with his brother, Robert, and sister, Julia after their father died in 1910. Elizabeth and Mary were highly educated women and they would frequently read the bible in Greek to the children in the evenings, discussing the issues of translation and the meaning of words and interpretation. Robert became a doctor, Julia a missionary and Maurice a seminarian and ultimately a missionary and then a minister. Mac's grounding in biblical exegesis from an early age combined with his commitment to social change led him in ways that most Midwestern Presbyterians did not tread. It made sense to apply the example of Jesus to his commitment to social justice and change. But how was a Christian approach to social change different?

Mac understood that the Jesus story was different from the conventional thought about power relationships in our world. Jesus did not overcome evil with force or displays of raw power. Jesus overcame evil by making himself vulnerable to that evil. The Bible MacCrackin read (in Greek and in English) said that the last shall be first, that to enter the kingdom of God the rich must give away their possessions, that in order to save your soul you must first lose your life. Paul said the follower of Jesus must be in this world but not of this world. Mac incorporated these

contradictory or paradoxical ideas into his very being. He understood that the abusive power of the state could never be violently overthrown to make people whole. Violence to make social change just exchanged one system of violence for another. As a result of his missionary work in Iran during the 1930's, his revulsion toward the western imperialism he experienced there, and his admiration of the work of Gandhi Mac came away depressed and ultimately excited that the world could change by embracing this paradoxical challenge to the world.

This carried through to his work in Cincinnati as he founded the first racially integrated mainstream church, struggled mightily to overthrow the powers of segregation through non-violent resistance, and symbolically fought the war machine of our country by withholding his taxes. And ultimately Mac never had any more power than when he was in prison. Mac was never freer than when he was in jail, because he was in jail for the right reasons and that carries a power greater than nation states. Mac's good friend Clarence Jordan, the great folk theologian and founder of Koinonia Farm in Georgia, summed it up best in this letter to Mac when he was serving time in Prison for tax resistance.

Jan 14, 1959

Dear Mac,

Time and again during all your encounters with the Government, and especially now that you are serving your sentence, I have thought how truly free you are. You are free of the bondage and tyranny which men en mass seek always to exercise over the individual. You are free of the fear of consequences, which lurks sneeringly in the inner recesses of men's hearts. You are free of the hatred and bitterness, those diseases of the soul, which blight and blast it and mar its creators' image.

You are free of the blood of the multitudes, which is spilled by our weapons of destruction. You are free to love whomsoever you will. You are free to walk without shame before your fellowman. You are free to pray honestly to God. Mac, you are free.

And I want to be free, too. I'm sick and tired of my bondage. I want to break the fetters of conformity, the chains of iniquitous traditions, the shackles of social pressure. I want to escape from the prison of class and caste and race and nation, that I may love all people freely and without fear.

I no longer wish to be a prisoner of mass-man, who would set me at variance against his brother and mine and even against myself. I do want to be a captive of God, loving and being loved, but neither fearing nor being feared.

Can such a one as I, like you, be free?

Your would-be escapee,

Clarence

Mac was able to be profound by doing the simple things. He could take a simple children's song as we heard today and make a commentary against nation states and the insanity of war. He could bring an entire City Council to its knees as they pleaded with him one by one in person to stop his fast for shelter for the homeless because they did not want his death on their consciences. At age 85 with an artificial knee he could climb the White House fence in an effort to stop the invasion of Iraq and not be prosecuted because the most powerful man on the face of the earth, our president, did not want to face the embarrassment of jailing an elderly saint who was only trying to stop the slaughter of innocent people. When Mac placed his body in the way of injustice he was doing it out of his love of humanity and his desire to imitate Jesus. He provided meaning for himself and inserted a sense of humanity and caring into a criminal justice system that thrived on brutality and ugliness. One of the most touching events I witnessed was when the former Sheriff of Hamilton County, Lincoln Stokes, embraced Mac in a hug of genuine caring and love at the time Mac was restored to the Presbyterian Church. At that moment an 82 year old war resister was receiving the embrace of brotherly love from his former jailer. Mac had that impact on people because everyone ultimately figured out that he was not grandstanding he was merely living out the ideals and values he professed.

Mac's life was not easy, however. In fact it was quite difficult at times for he suffered from chronic depression. His father reportedly suffered from bouts of melancholy and so did Mac. The first such incident occurred in Iran and was what actually forced him to return to the United States. Mission life was difficult and even more difficult when one starts to question the purpose of the mission as Mac did. He had gained a great respect for Islamic culture but developed an intense revulsion for the destruction of Persia brought on by imperialist domination. Finding a new purpose in ministry and social work in Chicago pushed back the darkness of doubt and depression, but it was never far from his consciousness as he carried on his crusades for racial justice and world peace.

What may have ultimately saved him from longer and deeper periods of depression was his intense commitment to his ministry and the work of justice. He was able to stay outside of himself while serving others. Mac filled his life from the moment he awoke to the minute his head hit the pillow at night. Many times those days were 17 hours long. He had little time for the demons that can possess a person who suffers from depression and that may have been his conscious strategy. It may also have been the reason he never married. He had too many jobs to do than to be slowed down by family obligations or his persistent depressive companion. Later in life the depression did come back in a big way as chronic pain from back and knee surgery took its toll on his body and his mind. Additionally, a whole generation of his closest friends was dying and it did not feel good being the one left behind. That, for many, is the burden of age. In his last months of life, however, Mac gained a renewed purpose and zest for life that allowed him to once again resume an active life as the conscience of Cincinnati gathering recognition and elder statesman status. Then, in the evening of December 29, 1997, Mac made a dozen or two phone calls to people he felt the need to convey his love and then he went to bed never to wake up.

He left behind a legacy of love and paradox. His love was unconditional and anyone who experienced it was showered with a gift from the universe. To be in his presence was to touch eternity. His selflessness was indicative of the fact that he lived outside of his ego. I never met anyone who had divorced himself so much from his ego at the same time his ego was as big as all outdoors. He could fill a space with his presence and then could also be invisible as he humbly served a humanity in need. He was a force of goodness and compassion that we are not likely to encounter again and I know that I will be forever changed for having been in his presence.