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## Rod Bush: A Revolutionary with a Soft Heart

In the years I have considered myself a revolutionary, some of the most antihuman behavior I have seen in the movement has come from people who also consider themselves revolutionaries, myself included. For many years, my behavior—especially in relationship to women—simply did not align with the ideological principles I valued. Quite frankly, I did not practice what I believed was necessary to transform the world.

Thanks to my relationship with Rod Bush, reflections on his life, and reflections on mine, I now have some idea of how to explain this contradictory phenomenon and can use these reflections as a model of how to conduct myself. Because I know I am not alone amongst revolutionaries guilty of not measuring up to their ideological principles, I offer these lessons and reflections as a nurturing challenge to people interested in revolutionary social change but unable to embody such political beliefs.

Conversations between Rod and me were typically about very broad questions concerning historical development, particular historical moments, or personal. Although we never really talked about how to

organize or the nuts and bolts of how to relate to people, what I saw in how Rod related with others greatly expanded my understanding of what it actually means to be a revolutionary. Unlike some movement elders who justified the atrocities sometimes committed by revolutionary states or people in the name of ideology, in his daily interactions Rod provided an example of how to engage in political struggle by emphasizing love more than ideology.

By reflecting on his life, broad political questions and historical developments, I've come to learn that when we emphasize ideology at the expense of human decency we create conditions for all kinds of behavior detrimental to human beings that are to be tolerated in the name of unity. However, when we primarily emphasize practicing love, as Rod Bush did, we create the conditions for people to struggle through our own shortcomings in ways that transcend ideology and create a unity rooted in the recognition of our mutually important contributions to community and the world.

What follows is a series of lessons I drew from watching Rod in the context of relationships and political struggle.

### **I. Understanding the Contradiction Between Practice and Belief: The Importance of Self-Reflection**

Rod began to appreciate the significance of relationships to political struggle by reflecting on how the struggles in which he was involved during the 1960s developed. By the early 1970s, influenced by both the League of Revolutionary Black Workers and several anticolonial African movements, many Black activists decided that organizations formed to fight only racism were no longer effective because the Black Liberation Movement had entered a new phase. Some of these activists took a Pan-Africanist route to Black liberation in the late 1960s while others embraced Marxism. Following the 1972 National Black Political Convention, many Black activists began to embrace Marxism because they began to sense class divisions within the Black community and connected the struggle in the U.S. to what was happening globally.

Before the convention, Amiri Baraka and the Congress of Afrikan People consistently held an ideological position advocating racial unity

and arguing that white people were the main enemy of Black people—a strategy that worked very well in their efforts to get Black politicians elected to positions in Newark. After the convention, Baraka changed his ideological position to one which argued that capitalism was the main enemy of Black people and argued that “racism and chauvinism are ideologies of capitalism,” and “justifications for the economic base” of the capitalist world.<sup>1</sup> Baraka explained this shift as follows:

With the end of the Sixties and full emergence of neo-colonialism ... we saw this plague spread throughout the United States under the guise of Black Power .... So that in many places ... where it once seemed simply like Black versus white, the growth and consolidation of our Black *petit bourgeoisie*, our middle class, grown fat off the gains made by the struggle of the people, in the civil-rights movement, self-defense movement, our development to the consciousness that we were an oppressed Black nation *i.e.* Black nationalism, the Black Power movements, Rebellions, Marxism, Afrikanism, and Pan-Afrikanisms—these developments along with others, made us re-evaluate our position.<sup>2</sup>

As a consequence of widespread experiences like these, Cedric Johnson has convincingly argued during the early 1970s that many Black Nationalist activists were forced to reckon with what he calls “the limits of race unity politics.”<sup>3</sup> Seeing the limits of racial unity play out along class divisions amongst Blacks created by Civil Rights Movement victories, many one-time nationalists embraced Marxism-Leninism as a way to create revolution in a society that had been fundamentally altered by previous Black struggles.

As a member of the Youth Organization for Black Unity (YOBU), Rod Bush was part of this transition from community based organizing movement in the 1960s towards Marxist organizing in the 1970s. As YOBU merged with other organizations to form the Marxist-Leninist Revolutionary Workers League (RWL), Rod became deeply troubled

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1. Amiri Baraka, “Why I Changed my Ideology’: Black Nationalism and Socialist Revolution,” *The Black World*, July, 1975, pp. 30-42, p. 33.

2. Baraka, “Why I Changed,” p. 32.

3. Cedric Johnson, *Revolutionaries to Race Leaders: Black Power and the making of African American Politics*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

by the way in which these organizations' commitment to organizing workers led them to leave behind the community members whom they had worked and developed relationships with over the previous decade. Although this shift made intellectual sense to Rod, he was heartbroken by the way this shift played out, often with the RWL and other organizations rejecting organizing anyone who did not work in a factory.

According to Max Elbaum, this narrow focus on organizing workers at the expense of all other social groups was rooted in the desire of the RWL and other New Communist Movement groups to build a Leninist vanguard political party. With organizational decisions guided by the goal of building a party made up of factory workers, because organizing unemployed community members or community elders detracted from building a revolutionary party made up of workers, new communist organizations all voted against organizing people who were not factory workers. Because these organizations also all followed the principles of democratic centralism, or the organizational structure Lenin described in *What is to Be Done?* where, "once open debate and then a vote had produced a party position, all members had to maintain unity in action," whether members agreed with the primacy of organizing only workers, they were bound to not organize other social groups.<sup>4</sup> Believing that the democratic centralist nature of the work made people with whom he had relationships and deeply loved seem irrelevant, Rod Bush was engaged in continuous dialogue with himself and others about the limits of democratic centralism as an organizational form.

Rod's questions about the limits of democratic centralism also stemmed from the way it played out within organizations. As the radical milieu of the late 1960s began to decline in the 1970s, the momentum and grassroots activity that led activists to embrace Marxism in the first place also declined. In the absence of that momentum emerged a drive for ideological unity and purity that, as Rod himself described it, led both Black nationalists and Marxists within the Black movement

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4. Max Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air: Sixties Radicals Turn to Lenin, Mao, and Che*. London, Verso Books, 2002:165.

to lose “sight of the subtlety of the real world, in which both race and class must be analyzed correctly.”<sup>5</sup> Regarding the larger left, as the movement declined, the revolutionary zeal that continued to exist amongst the left “tended to enclose cadre in a self-contained and distorted world.”<sup>6</sup> Having lost sight of changes in the larger economy, changes in American culture, and changes in the relationship of race to class, the movement took on a culture of ruthless criticism where people were purged from organizations for things as varied and insignificant to the larger world as ultra-democracy and unrepentant Menshevism.

Thirty-five years later, around 2010, Rod Bush and I were discussing this shift and he was brought to tears. As he continued to talk about his revolutionary activism in the 1970s and 1980s, he kept coming back to the point that he missed those relationships and the people the RWL purged and left behind. He was clear that they were good people who had contributions to make and should not have been left behind. Over the course of the conversation each of us began to stress that treating people decently, honoring their dignity, and respecting the contributions they have to make is just as important to a revolutionary movement as ideology.

Rod was not alone in having reached this conclusion. Shea Howell, a revolutionary active in the National Organization for an American Revolution (NOAR) during this shift in the 1970s began asking herself “How can it be that [revolutionaries] do to one another the very thing we say the dominant culture does to us?” after NOAR ceased to function in the 1980s.<sup>7</sup> For Howell, the tendency of revolutionaries to treat each other poorly and/or prioritize ideology over treating people decently stems largely from “the male belief that you controlled a lot more than you do,” leading revolutionaries to prioritize having “the

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5. Rod Bush, *We Are Not What We Seem: Black Nationalism and Class Struggle in the American Century*. New York, NYU Press, 1990:212.

6. Elbaum, *Revolution in the Air*: 165.

7. Sharon Howell Oral History, *Detroit Lives*, edited by Robert H. Mast, Philadelphia, Temple University Press, 1994: 115-188:118.

right idea” over process, development, and listening to people.<sup>8</sup>

## **II. Embodying the World We Want to Live In: Rod Bush’s Commitment to Loving Others and Treating People as Ends In Themselves**

Following his experience with the RWL, Rod Bush remained a revolutionary and devoted a vast amount of energy to building relationships and nurturing people. He was always asking me what I thought about something and encouraging me to further develop whatever I was thinking. Rod never told me what to think but instead was deeply interested in listening to me. I think that listening to others was one way that Rod let people know that they were important. He was deeply reflective, nurtured many, and would not tolerate when people spoke ill of others. Still carrying the pain related to having left those relationships behind thirty-five years prior, Rod was committed to reflecting and learning from the past in ways that people who are committed to loving others have to be. He was committed to learning from those reflections and intentionally behaving in ways that would produce results different from previous ones.

Rod Bush never expected anybody to be perfect, he understood people made mistakes, and he was forgiving. He met people where they were, connecting to them through experiences he knew they could mutually relate to. Whether involved in politics, academic life, or interacting with people on the street, Rod treated people well and treated them with dignity. He was willing to learn from his experiences of people being ostracized and stigmatized, and treated others in ways that allowed them to be caring and thoughtful.

Once, he, Melanie (Mel) Bush, and I organized a workshop along with several of their students. In a meeting with their students to discuss how they might take our work forward on campus, I made a thoughtless remark about how I had a different relationship to college campuses from everyone else that was really not useful at that moment. In truth, I was experiencing a great deal of insecurity in many areas of my life and, unwilling to deal with that insecurity in a mature way; the

8. Ibid:116.

feelings came out sideways during our reflections. When at their house a couple months later, Rod and Mel confronted me about my behavior. Never have I been approached in a manner that was as effective as the way they engaged me. They were empathetic yet committed to the possibility that I could be more considerate and useful. They painted a picture of my behavior, presented some of its possible implications, and supported me in thinking through how to understand what led to what I did and how to navigate addressing the consequences.

That moment remains for me as a model of how to lovingly engage each other in a generative rather than demeaning, derogatory, or dismissive process of confrontation. I have had the rare fortune of relationships with several men from Rod's generation, all of whom have played a role in my political development and training. My relationship with Rod was exceptional because he explicitly and often spoke of how important it is to be loving. Significantly, Rod also did more than talk. He provided a profound example of what it looks like to be a loving revolutionary and to live with a soft heart.

Minutes after Rod Bush came to tears over our discussion about the people and relationships the RWL left behind, we were both in tears as we reflected on and shared the ways that each of us had seen relationships left behind when they were no longer strategically useful for whatever the political aims of the moment. It is a conversation that has never left me. From it I took a belief that if as people who want to make the world better we build relationships only as a means to a strategic end, we are not doing anything much differently than those we oppose. We are merely separated from our oppressors by our justifications for using people to get what we want accomplished. As Martin Luther King, Jr.—and Rod Bush—understood so clearly, when we treat people as means to an end—rather than as ends in themselves—no matter how righteous the ends, we debase the worth of individual people.<sup>9</sup>

In Rod Bush, I learned that every individual matters. Their dreams

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9. Martin Luther King, Jr. "The Ethical Demands for Integration," *Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York, Harper Collins, 117-125: 119.

are important, their hopes are important, their lives are important, and so are their feelings. Rod taught me this on the stoop outside of his and Mel's Flatbush home where he said hello to everyone who passed and to groups of young Black men on the corner who looked at him as if he were crazy in response to his assertive friendliness. In merely saying "hello" to young men the rest of the world has discarded and been taught to fear, Rod Bush created humane relationships with them, letting them know they mattered.

Rod was determined to build community because he knew that community was vital to the state of the world. Through Rod's example, I learned that community matters not just for sustaining individuals involved in movement work, but that it matters because human beings matter, and one way to honor that is to invest in them, treat them decently, and build relationships with them. Rod invested in others by building relationships, asking them questions, checking on them, and in the process built connections with them. He expected nothing in return and invested in people because it was the right thing to do. He brought people together and just wanted them to talk to each other.

He asked questions and listened for answers. He believed everybody had a contribution to make. By honoring and insisting upon this contribution, Rod created conditions for people to grow and contribute to the world whatever it was they had to give. People who Rod invested in took this responsibility seriously and through this process of building relationships, Rod built community and prepared others to do the same. During a historical moment when so many of us seem more concerned with taking whatever we can get, Rod sets an important example of how to be a human being.

Because he so valued people and community, Rod Bush never tolerated disparaging comments about people, even those he disagreed with. Rod was always looking at what people contributed rather than looking at where their analysis fell short. He of course knew that people needed to do intellectual work but unlike many radicals who only have relationships with people they politically agree with, I never once heard him harp on people's shortcomings, attack the character of people he disagreed with, or see people in need of conversion to

his viewpoint. Even in very difficult struggles he often refused to walk away because he was committed to making sure that whatever point or practice was being struggled over became as significant as it could be.

I don't know if he would have used this language but Rod Bush lived as though he believed in the sacredness of the human personality. He shared Malcolm X's commitment to confront wrongdoing and make that confrontation plain.<sup>10</sup> He also believed, as did Martin Luther King, Jr. that in making this confrontation, conditions were created for growth.<sup>11</sup> Rod believed we were all capable of doing better and his daily interactions exemplified this commitment. When people interacted with Rod they knew they were loved and by seeing these interactions, my understanding of what it means to be a revolutionary has expanded greatly.

Rod provided me with an example of how to engage in political struggle emphasizing the practice of love more than ideology. As feminist philosopher Susan Griffith has made clear, "ideology holds the promise that one may control reality with the mind," and that "with this promise, always, inevitably, no matter what the ideology, the other [that may be controlled] is born."<sup>12</sup> In contrast, by practicing love and confronting people and systems with love, we empower rather than control. By loving, we create conditions for people to understand the choices that lie before them and can support them in struggling through those choices. In creating these conditions, we support people in coming to better know themselves and the contributions they are capable of making.

As I learned from being confronted by Rod (and Melanie), a loving confrontation can support others to struggle through their shortcomings in ways that prioritizing ideology seldom does. By rooting struggle in love for each other rather than in one's position

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10. See *Malcolm X Speaks*, edited by George Breitman, New York, Grove Press, 1966.

11. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," *The Radical King*, edited by Cornel West, Boston, Beacon Press, 2015:39-54.

12. Susan Griffith, "The Way of All Ideology," *Signs*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Spring 1982):641-660.

on a question, the potential exists to create a unity rooted in the recognition of our mutually important contributions to community and the world.

### **III. Conclusion: A Revolutionary With a Soft Heart**

In Rod Bush's behavior after the decline of the Black movement, I was given an opportunity to develop an enlarged understanding of what it meant to be a revolutionary and to live one's political principles.

While so many of the people who trained me believed that developing the correct ideology and position on political questions was the prerequisite to revolutionary struggle, Rod provided a different model of leadership and intellectual development. With Rod, I learned that revolutionary leadership could be given by conducting oneself in ways that attracted people to you, rather than by struggling with people over political positions. Building on what I saw Rod do, today my political practice rarely involves political arguments. Rather, it is much more likely to build on asking people how they are, what they are thinking, and trying to be useful to them.

I have found that engaging people along these human lines rather than along strictly political lines allows me to build the kinds of relationships with people where struggles over political questions can be rooted in a relationship of respect and trust, and can therefore be transformative for everyone involved. People listen to me because I treat them decently. When I challenge a position they hold, because they respect me and believe I care about them, they take me seriously and sometimes reflect on their position and what it means.

Without Rod Bush, his commitment to reflecting on his own life, and his commitment to resolve the contradictions of his past, I doubt I would be able to articulate this method of revolutionary political practice. Thanks to his soft heart and willingness to give, I am a better human being, thinker, organizer, and leader. The world is a better place because of Rod Bush's contribution to it. My life is better for having been blessed by his love, his presence, and his friendship.

## Abstract

This essay authored by Matthew Birkhold, titled “A Revolutionary with a Soft Heart,” is a chapter in the anthology *Rod Bush: Lessons from a Radical Black Scholar on Liberation, Love, and Justice*, edited by Melanie E. L. Bush, and co-edited by Rose M. Brewer, Daniel Douglas, Loretta Chin, and Robert Newby (2019). The chapter explores what Rod Bush’s way of being means for practicing revolutionary leadership. Drawing extensively from the author’s relationship with Rod, it reflects on aspects of Bush’s participation in the Black liberation movement, the movement’s development, and Rod’s reflection on how the movement and organizations he was a part of developed. Building on some of Rod Bush’s reflections on how that movement developed and the way it treated its members and non-workers, Birkhold explores how Bush’s reflections on this movement contributed to his later practice of nurturing, caring for, and practicing love with people. Finally, the author explains how his political practice has benefitted from his relationship with Rod Bush and the lessons Bush learned from the Black liberation movement in the 1970s, namely that when organizers emphasize love more than ideology, they create conditions for not only the political development of people but also their personal transformation.

## Author

Matthew Birkhold takes seriously the idea that all people have a responsibility for the world around them and believes deeply in the capacity of human beings to make the world more humane. Based in Washington, DC, he is a trainer, facilitator, educator, researcher, and writer who specializes in creating space for people to develop a holistic approach to social change and personal growth. In contrast to issue-based approaches for social change, Matt’s work focuses on the relationships between issues, people, and processes, the way those relationships shape individual people, and the way they constitute a larger system. He has published widely on the relationship of race to capitalism and on social movements. He is the author of the forthcoming book, “A Change Goin Come: Lessons from Detroit’s Black Power Movement for Organizing in a Period of Systemic Transition.” He holds a Ph.D. in Sociology and does work with Visionary Organizing Lab, a Washington DC based think and practice tank.

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