

The Missing Word
— [Bruce Hartford](#) July, 2014
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As a writer by trade, I love the English language. I love its richness, its breadth, its depth. Yet it's missing a word. We know and hold an important concept for which English provides no word that I can find.

Today, those few schools who make an effort to teach the Civil Rights Movement generally do so in terms of the Supreme Court putting the cause into motion with a bold ruling, one or two charismatic leaders, a handful of famous protests in a few well-known places, some tragic martyrs, and the gracious largess of magnanimous legislators. Or, as Julian Bond summed it up so succinctly, "Rosa sat so Martin could march so Obama could run." But we veterans of the Southern Freedom Movement know that without the activity, determination, and bravery of hundreds of thousands of men and women of all ages in cities and towns and hamlets across the South (and the nation) there would have been no court rulings, no movement, no famous leaders, no new laws, and no change.

For us, the Movement we participated in was above all a mass peoples' movement — people coming together to make history for themselves. What was most fundamental and profound in that struggle was the central role played by men and women, boys and girls, transforming their own lives for themselves through extraordinary courage. For us, these non-famous folk who are overlooked or undervalued by mainstream history were the heart & soul, blood & bone of the Freedom Movement.

When speaking of these unsung warriors, we sometimes use terms like "ordinary" and "regular" to distinguish them from the famous and well-known, but that's not right. There was nothing "ordinary" or "regular" about the men & women who risked all to defy white-supremacy by lining up to register at the courthouse, or those who sat on their porches with shotguns guarding us from night-riding terrorists, or the young girls and boys who dared dogs and firehoses and filthy jail cells to march for freedom. No, the "ordinary" people took counsel of their fears and stayed away from "that mess." "Regular" people did not attend mass meetings, go on freedom rides, sit-in at the five & dime, or defy Bull Connor and Sheriff Clark. So what do we call those who did?

Selma Alabama had one of the largest local movements in the South. Because of a court-ordered appearance-book system, we know that somewhere around 15% of eligible Dallas County Blacks attempted to register when it was hard, and humiliating, and dangerous to do so. Fifteen percent doesn't sound like much, but it was way more

than most local movements achieved. Wherever it was across the South, and whether it was 5% or 10% or 15%, those brave few who risked life and livelihood by daring to defy the white-supremacy were neither "regular" nor "ordinary."

Perhaps Bob Moses comes closest with the term "unexpected actors," and from the point of view of our cultural gatekeepers they certainly were unexpected (by them). But for those of us familiar with the Peoples History that Howard Zinn wrote about they were not unexpected. Down through the generations there have been many peoples' mass movements that changed history — movements carried in the hearts and on the backs of thousands, tens of thousands, and hundreds of thousands. The labor struggles of the 1930s changed the economic and social face of America, as did the Woman Suffrage movement, and the Populists, and the Abolitionists, and the (well, you get the idea).

But as with the Freedom Movement, when that history is taught (if it's taught at all) it's in terms of the famous few, not the unsung many — John L. Lewis & Walter Reuther, Susan B. Anthony, William Jennings Bryan, William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Breecher Stowe, and (hopefully) Frederick Douglas & Harriet Tubman. But not the labor rank and file, the courageous suffrage protesters, the embattled sharecroppers, or those who risked their lives on the underground railroad. They too were neither famous nor "ordinary."

For some of us, social and political causes are the major focus of our lives, and for us there are words. We're called "activists" or "organizers" (and, yes, even "shit-disturbers"). But we alone do not make history, we are always too few. History is made and changed when the fives and tens and fifteen percents of not-ordinary, not-famous people stand up for justice. The thousands of children who marched into Birmingham jails, the thousands of adults who lined up outside county courthouses, the thousands of men and women who housed and guarded us at night.

The culture promulgated by our schools and mass media tell us that history and change are made by individuals — kings and presidents, tycoons and innovators, wealthy thieves and violent terrorists, but never by masses of non-ordinary, non-famous people who show up and take a stand. We who participated in the Freedom Movement know how wrong that is, but how do we fight back against this false history? How do we wage this culture war? Perhaps, as scripture tells us, "In the beginning was the word." But what word?