

50 Years Since Selma

by Rev. Don Garrett

delivered 3/8/15 at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

I was four years old when Thurgood Marshall argued against public school segregation before the U.S. Supreme Court. I couldn't read yet and wasn't really aware of national news yet. But I do remember someone reading a roadside billboard aloud to me. It said, "Impeach Earl Warren." Earl Warren was the Chief Justice when the court ruled that segregation was unconstitutional in the case of *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, and there was strong sentiment against the decision, even in Syracuse, New York.

But I was aware the next year when Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of the bus in Montgomery, Alabama, sparking the Montgomery bus boycott.

My racial education was slow. I lived in the lily-white north and my father grew up in Oklahoma and Kansas. My grandmother taught me what the word, "pickaninny" meant.

I didn't notice the first Civil Rights Act passed in 1957 but I watched the National Guard enforce integration in Little Rock, Arkansas, on the TV news.

The 1960 lunch counter sit-in in Greensboro, North Carolina didn't even make the news where I lived, but I watched the riots at Ole Miss two years later as James Meredith enrolled.

Alabama seemed like a troubled foreign country to me as I watched dogs and fire hoses used on a crowd of children marching for their rights in 1963. And I watched Governor George Wallace stand in a school house door, proclaiming, "Segregation now, segregation forever."

I watched the March on Washington in August of that year. I heard the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. I was thirteen years old and starting to get the idea that America had a problem.

This was emphasized the next month by the murder of Medgar Evers, and the church bombing that killed four little girls in Montgomery, Alabama.

And I do remember the TV news coverage of the events in Selma, Alabama in 1965, almost exactly 50 years ago today.

It began with a quest for African-American voting rights, which didn't exist in the South at that time. African-Americans were not allowed even to register to vote, much less cast their ballots. And Unitarian Universalist ministers and laypeople were at the forefront of the civil rights effort.

But it wasn't always that way. We remember Unitarians and Universalists as strident abolitionists in the 19th century, working hard to end slavery. After all, Julia Ward Howe wrote "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" in response to a request by her Unitarian minister, James Freeman Clarke. But our movement didn't wholeheartedly share those sentiments. It's remarkable that the most famous Unitarian hymn isn't widely known to be Unitarian. It isn't even in our hymnals. And many of those who did favor ending slavery stopped short of advocating full integration and equality.

Those issues awaited another century to come to the fore, and it wasn't necessarily the American black experience that brought them there. The Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed, in his book, *The Selma Awakening*, points out that at the time of the Second World War, Jews were thought of as a separate race. As the horror of the Nazi persecution grew, more and more Americans began to recognize the parallels between European Jews and Black African-Americans. Nazi fascism and racism became more and more identified with each other in the American consciousness and the fervor with which all opposed Hitler's goals carried over into developing antiracism at home as well.

Sometimes the emergence of a great evil can spark a moral awakening that might not otherwise have come to pass.

And, while there was little passion within our congregations on this topic, there were influential teachers who helped to shape the views of a new generation of our ministers.

Among these was the Universalist minister and educator, Clarence Skinner, who wrote a little book called, *The Social Implications of Universalism* in 1915. Rooted in the Social Gospel movement, it went beyond that to proclaim that

Universal Brotherhood was “the great social dynamic of the twentieth century.” His classes in ethics frequently dwelt on the issue of African Americans in the United States.

James Luther Adams, another influential educator, had visited Germany in the 1930’s and been detained and interrogated by the Gestapo. This experience led him to the conviction that churches needed to provide a counterbalance to the powerful influences of business and government on the structure and habits of civil communities.

And, as King worked on his Doctorate at Boston University, the African-American theologian, Howard Thurman, influenced him directly. King always carried a copy of Thurman’s book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, which proclaimed the need to, “Love your enemy. Take the initiative in seeking a way by which you can have the experience of mutual worth and value. It may be hazardous, but you must do it.”

Morrison-Reed reflected on Thurman’s influence on King, quoting Walter Fluker, who said, “I don’t believe you’d get a Martin Luther King Jr. without a Howard Thurman.

The events of 1965 began when Dr. King decided that Selma would be a good place to demonstrate for voting rights. He chose Selma because he knew that the sheriff there, Jim Clark, was a short-tempered violent man who could be counted on to overreact. King’s strategy of nonviolent resistance needed a violent response with which to contrast the peaceful patience of the demonstrators. He got that and more.

The campaign began in January with a rally at Brown Chapel in Selma, followed by a demonstration by 105 black schoolteachers. In early February King and 500 schoolchildren were arrested in Selma and 650 African Americans marched in nearby Marion. King wrote from jail that there were more Negroes in jail with him than there were on the voting rolls.

Two weeks later another march ends with a brutal attack that injured dozens. A state trooper shot and killed the unarmed 26-year-old Jimmie Lee Jackson.

On March 7 the march from Selma to Montgomery began, but state troopers and a sheriff's posse brutally attacked the marchers with clubs and tear gas, beating them back.

King then sent out a telegram calling for religious leaders to join him in Selma. It read, "In the vicious maltreatment of defenseless citizens of Selma, where old women and young children were gassed and clubbed at random, we have witnessed an eruption of the disease of racism which seeks to destroy all of America. No American is without responsibility. All are involved in the sorrow that rises from Selma to contaminate every crevice of our national life. The people of Selma will struggle on for the soul of the nation, but it is fitting that all Americans help to bear the burden. I call therefore, on clergy of all faiths representative of every part of the country, to join me for a ministers' march to Montgomery on Tuesday, March 9th. In this way all America will testify to the fact that the struggle in Selma is for the survival of democracy everywhere in our land."

All across the nation, ministers responded to this call, but none in greater proportion than the Unitarian Universalists, who were represented by more than 250 clergy and 500 laypersons among the 30,000 who walked onto the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 9th.

At the critical moment, King knelt to pray, rose, turned around and led the marchers back off the bridge, returning to Selma. Two weeks later, after an injunction against the march was lifted, the 5-day March to Montgomery was resumed with a National Guard escort.

Among the many people beaten, injured, or maimed in this campaign, there were three martyrs: Jimmie Lee Jackson, James Joseph Reeb, and Viola Gregg Liuzzo.

Jackson was the first, following a march on February 18. When state police began beating his mother and grandfather, he stepped in to protect them and was shot dead at close range.

Jackson was local, black, and a part of the local struggle in Alabama. But Reeb and Liuzzo didn't need to be there.

James Reeb was a 38-year-old Unitarian minister, social worker, and civil rights activist. He grew up in Wyoming, was a National Merit Scholar and developed

an acute sense of social responsibility, which recognized the need to improve the lives of the poor and help those who were denied their full human rights. After serving in the military he went to Princeton to prepare for the ministry and was ordained in the Presbyterian church. He also married his sweetheart from junior college and they had four children.

As time went on, he wrote, "I have clearly progressed in my views until I am much more of a humanist than a deist or theist." He eventually found a home in the Unitarian church and served at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, D.C. Eager for the opportunity to make a greater contribution to civil rights, he moved to Boston to take the directorship of The American Friends Service Committee Metropolitan Boston Low Income Housing Program. He and his wife chose to live in the African-American neighborhood of Roxbury, saying, "that you could not make a difference for African-Americans while living comfortable in a white community."

Jim Reeb joined the Arlington Street Church and served on the Unitarian Universalist Association's Commission on Religion and Race early in 1965. But this work was interrupted when he received King's March 8 telegram asking for his support in Selma.

Mark Morrison-Reed wrote of his decision, "He wanted to go to Selma. After a hectic afternoon, he went home to talk with his wife. Marie Reeb, as the parent responsible for taking care of their four children, including an infant, questioned why he needed to go. They had walked side by side during the March on Washington in 1963, but having watched the broadcast the night before, she knew this march was different. She strenuously objected, while he steadfastly insisted, until, reluctantly, she ceded to the urgency of his need."

On Tuesday evening, after the abortive march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, according to Morrison-Reed, a group of ministers gathered at Walker's Café, one of the few integrated restaurants in the city, where both black and white protesters had gathered. "With the jukebox playing, it felt like old home week. Famished, they dug into southern fried chicken, mashed potatoes, and collard greens. They relaxed.

“ ‘When he entered a room everything brightened up,’ a colleague said of Reeb. ‘He had a trace of mischief about him, and a deep sense of humor that endeared him to us all.’ ”

One of those ministers, Orloff Miller, later recalled, “ ‘After eating, each of us in turn phoned our wives from a booth in the restaurant to let them know of the day’s events, that we were safe, and that we would be staying in Selma for at least another day. . . It was just dusk on a warm spring evening, the downtown area felt quite peaceful, and I recall thinking this could be any downtown street of any town in America.’

“When the Revs. Clark Olsen and Jim Reeb joined him, instead of turning left and heading back the way they had come, they turned right, since that was the shortest way to [the church]. . .

“Four or five white locals came out of a variety store behind them on the opposite side of the street and began yelling, ‘Hey, you niggers.’ [They] sped up, but the men ran at them. Olsen, who was furthest from the curb, saw them best. ‘They attacked us from behind, at least one carried a large club – possibly a baseball bat or length of pipe – with which he took a roundhouse swing at Jim’s head.’ He and Miller heard it land.”

After kicking and beating them some more, the attackers left, an ambulance was called, and then began the desperate race to save Reeb’s life. His injuries were too severe to treat in Selma, so they needed to drive to a hospital in Montgomery. But the trip was marked by problems and delays. The hospital wouldn’t admit him without a \$150 deposit, so they needed to figure that out. Then they hit the road but had a flat tire. Not daring to change the tire on a dark country road, they drove the clanging rim to a radio station for help. A second ambulance came but police refused to escort them to the hospital and they feared for their lives alone on those rural roads that night.

They eventually got to the hospital. Reeb was treated but his wounds were too severe for him to recover. His wife, Marie, flew to his side, and, at 12:15 p.m. on Thursday, March 11, she made the decision to stop using artificial means to keep her husband alive.

Mark Morrison-Reed wrote that, "A memorial service was held at Browns Chapel in Selma on Monday, March 15. Over one hundred Unitarian Universalist ministers and another one hundred laypersons, as well as the UUA Board of Trustees attended. . . Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered the eulogy, saying, in part, 'He was a witness to the truth that men of different races and classes might live, eat, and work together as brothers.' "

Many Unitarian Universalist churches across the country held services for Reeb. Viola Liuzzo was one of those who attended a memorial service at The First Unitarian Church in Detroit, Michigan, where she was a member.

Having grown up in the South, she was well aware of the injustice there. And she didn't forget. Her lifelong friend, Sarah Evans, was an African American, also from the South. Evans said of Liuzzo, "Viola Liuzzo lived a life that combined the care of her family and her home with a concern for the world around her. This involvement with her times was not always understood by her friends; nor was it appreciated by those around her." Liuzzo was active in local protest efforts and was arrested twice. Each time she insisted on a trial for the publicity it brought to the issues she was advocating.

After attending a memorial service for James Reeb, she helped organize a Selma sympathy march in Detroit. Afterward she called her husband and told him that there were "too many people who just stand around talking," and that she was going to Selma for a week. She asked her friend, Sarah Evans, to explain to her children where their mother had gone and that she would call home every night. When Evans warned her that she could be killed, Liuzzo replied simply, "I want to be part of it."

Liuzzo was on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 21 when the march from Selma to Montgomery resumed. It was a five days' walk. She stayed the last night in a Catholic retreat center just inside the Montgomery city limits. The next morning she told one of the parish priests, "Father, I have a feeling of apprehension. Something is going to happen today. Someone is going to be killed."

Following the march, she and another civil rights worker, Leroy Moton, drove five marchers back to Selma, dropped them off and began the return trip to

Montgomery. Mary Stanton, in her biography of Liuzzo, described what Liuzzo did next. "Between the airport and Selma a car full of whites drove up behind them and banged into the bumper of the Oldsmobile several times before passing. . . When they stopped for gas, white bystanders shouted insults at the integrated group. Further along, the driver of another car turned on his high beams and left them shining into Vi's rearview mirror. 'Two can play at that game,' she said and deliberately slowed up, making the offending car pass her. Finally, when another car pulled up alongside . . . while the one in front slowed down, Vi had to jam on her brakes. They were boxed in . . . but Mrs. Liuzzo seemed to be more annoyed than afraid. As they drove along Highway 80, Vi began singing freedom songs: "And long before I'll be a slave I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free.' "

They followed her for 20 miles. She sped up, trying to outrun them, singing, "We Shall Overcome." About half way between Selma and Montgomery, four men pulled their car up next to hers and shot her in the head. Liuzzo was killed instantly.

There followed a series of memorial services across the country for this fallen hero. After one, a high requiem mass held in Detroit, the priest said "I felt very strongly about this woman and her goodness. She inspired us all. Her energy, enthusiasm and compassion were contagious and put many of us to shame."

And there are reasons for us to feel that shame, still, today. Key provisions of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 which was passed in the wake of the events in Selma, have been reversed by the U.S. Supreme Court. Since that time at least 21 states have introduced legislation to limit or reduce access to voting rights in ways that especially target minorities and the poor.

And, while overt Jim Crow laws have been undone, the change has been one from gross to subtle. Much of white America has internalized discrimination in ways that resist legal changes. Police feel justified in considering blacks to be especially dangerous members of our society. They are routinely arrested and sentenced more harshly than whites. We have created a justice system that has more African American men under its control than were enslaved in 1850.

And the recent Justice Department report on the behavior of the police in Ferguson, Missouri, makes it clear that the same patterns of oppression, brutality

and even murder of African Americans are still widely present on our streets to this day.

There may not be any simple answer to this. Yes, we protest; yes, we advocate; but any healing response must include the profoundly religious discipline of meeting hatred and fear with love. I invite each of you to examine your hearts, take a look at what you find there. Ask yourselves, "Where does that fear come from? Is it justified or am I being influenced by negative stereotypes?" Ask yourselves, "From what does that feeling of distaste or annoyance spring? Could I be unwittingly perpetuating unjust prejudices that I claim not to hold?" How can we learn to open our hearts to people as much as we do to issues?

I invite you to find out.

May it be so.