

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, 405 Washington Ave. Albany, NY 12206

2.22.15 Sermon: "Selma: The UU Backstory"

Presenter: Rev. Sam Trumbore

Sermon

I wasn't ready for how emotionally moved I was seeing the movie Selma in the beginning of January. (Have other of you seen it?) If you haven't, I'd recommend you do so before next Sunday when Mark Morrison-Reed will be our theme presenter at our joint service at Doane Stuart's chapel.

I got choked up just seeing the images of Jimmy Lee Jackson, James Reeb, and Viola Liuzzo appear on the screen. (These are the three people who died in March of 1965 as part of the actions happening in and around Selma) Two of them were Unitarian Universalists. Reeb was a Unitarian Universalist minister living in a predominantly African American Boston neighborhood, sending his children to local public schools, and working on community housing issues for the American Friends Service Committee. Liuzzo left her children in Detroit, compelled to action to support the march Dr. King was organizing from Selma to Montgomery to advocate for voting rights.

Anyone who has any doubt about how meaningful the right to vote is in a democratic society should see this movie. Sheriff Clark who suppresses the demonstrations was elected to support the racist status quo. When non-whites got the vote after the voting rights act was passed in 1965, they voted him out of office.

I hadn't realized I had a personal connection with this history until I called my father to wish him a happy birthday Wednesday. I grew up in Newark, Delaware, not far from Washington. I knew my parents had participated in marches there, but found out not before 1965. I was eight that year and my sister was six.

What my father did remember however, was Rev. Reeb speaking at our UU Fellowship in Newark in 1964. The sermon he gave was well received by the congregation. After the service, my parents invited him to our house to serve him lunch before he traveled home. Though I don't remember it, my father introduced him to me and we talked during lunch. My father has a clear memory of Reeb sitting on our back steps enjoying the spring sunshine in a splendid moment of happiness as my mother was preparing our meal.

Remembering these personal connections and the humanity of those involved in history is important. History tends to flatten people into two dimensional characters that fit the narratives leaders want to tell to shape our views and opinions. Those old enough to remember the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr while he was still alive are much more aware of the ways he has been mythologized than those of us who are younger and didn't know him.

I heard a little of that process listening to Ron Cordes, the historian responsible for the amazing six hour DVD survey of Unitarian Universalist history ten of us have been watching for the last six weeks on Wednesday night. He discussed Selma last Wednesday calling it a seminal event in the history of Unitarian Universalism, responsible for defining our commitment to Social Justice and a growing commitment to anti-racism and anti-oppression work.

So just **what** happened in Selma, *how* did it happen, *what* did the follow up look like and *how* might remembering that event fifty years later continue to affect us today?

I've been asking these questions these past six months in preparation for this anniversary. I've been asking these questions as I've worked with Paul and Don to define our event on Saturday and with the other CRUUNY congregations defining our Sunday service. Mark Morrison-Reed's book and my conversations recently and over the many years I have known him have given me a little insight I'd like to share this morning. I'm calling it "the UU Backstory" because my goal is to prepare you to hear him on Saturday (if you decide you'd like to go to that event) and next Sunday. I know where he wants to go and I want to prepare you to be ready to go with him.

First we need to contextualize Selma in a flow of historical events that catalyzed desegregation. Mark emphasizes how important fighting the Nazis was during World War II to raise the consciousness of the white community.

The Nazis were blatant racists imprisoning and killing millions of Jews, Roma, Poles, Slavs, and other minorities they despised. Some European Americans and many people of African descent connected the dots looking at the racism back home. They recognized we had a similar problem here at home. People of African decent were recruited into jobs and military service during the war effort. Their hard work and bravery were also noticed. Once the war was over, the scene was set for things to begin changing.

First came a series of Supreme Court decisions and Presidential executive orders that got the ball rolling.

- In 1946, Morgan v. Virginia made it illegal to segregate interstate buses.
- In 1947, interracial members of the Congress of Racial Equality (called CORE) traveled

on interstate buses and trains through border states testing this new freedom.

- In 1948, Shelly v. Kraemer made restrictive housing covenants illegal.
- That same year, Truman desegregated the federal work force which included the military.
- In 1954, Brown v. Topeka desegregated public education.
- In 1955, 14 year-old Emmett Till was killed and that December, Rosa Parks decided her feet were just too tired to go the back of the bus starting the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Dr. King stepped out on the world stage.
- In 1957, the first civil rights legislation since Reconstruction was passed by Congress.
- in 1960, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee started sit-ins.

The big event that drew 1600 Unitarian Universalists was the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom where Dr. King gave his "I Have a Dream" speech. They were part of a crowd of 250,000 people who took part. The UUA President Dana McLean Greeley led the UU contingent.

Throughout the post World War Two era, Unitarians and Universalists were involved in fair housing and school desegregation efforts. A significant number of our ministers were involved in NAACP chapters and Urban Leagues. Civil rights work was fast becoming a cause that could bring together the newly formed Unitarians and Universalists in the Unitarian Universalist Association created in 1961.

Ministers had been prepared for civil rights work in some of our seminaries. The first half of the twentieth century saw the influence of the Social Gospel movement on liberal clergy. Heaven was something humanity was responsible for creating here. The Social Gospel Christians rejected toleration of oppression in exchange for an eternal reward.

Clarence Skinner at Tufts Seminary, James Luther Adams at Meadville Lombard then Harvard Divinity; Howard Thurman at Boston University School of Theology (who would guide Dr. King) and Reinhold Niebuhr at Union Seminary were all prominent liberally religious professors shaping their young minds.

In this way, a significant number of our ministers were primed to respond to the violence they witnessed as they watched in real time the police and vigilantes beat and tear gas nonviolent marchers attempting to cross the Edmond Pettus Bridge. The millions who watched the unfolding events during the interruption of a show about the 20 year anniversary of the end of the war and the Nuremberg Trials couldn't miss the parallels.

Selma just didn't happen, as those who've seen the Selma movie will remember. Dr. King strategically chose Selma as a place to grab the attention of the world. He succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. The telegram he sent after Bloody Sunday, March 7th, moved dozens of our ministers and leaders to go to Selma. The interfaith response was unprecedented. The multi-racial, multi-faith gathering to fight for justice was something that I doubt any of those clergy had ever experienced in their entire lives.

And in that magical moment that brought together people seeking justice in solidarity, they tasted the experience of what Dr. King called the Beloved Community.

And that taste was good. Very good. And they hungered for more.

Mark Morrison-Reed brings their voices to us. I wanted you to hear them earlier because you get a taste of the power of what they experienced in their words. And those who didn't go were affected and changed too.

I spent Wednesday afternoon in our archives looking for clues about what happened here in Albany in 1965. Sadly there is little evidence saved from that year for me to go on. What I did find was an editorial to the Times Union by our minister at that time, the Rev. Nick Cardell. He wrote:

Public awareness and sensitivity has been steadily mounting as the days and weeks and months and years have passed in the struggle for civil rights. Now, the fever pitch of public indignation may, at long last, encourage and enable the Congress to guarantee the most basic civil right of citizens equally to all--the right to vote...

This last week has seen aroused people all across the nation demonstrating their concern for civil rights and their grief over the tragic events in Selma. In our own city of Albany, hundreds gathered last Sunday at the Capitol in a service of affirmation and memory. There we affirmed our knowledge that when even one man is unjustly deprived of the right to assemble, to petition, to vote, all men must rouse themselves. There we expressed our grief for those who have suffered and died for our cause.

At the same time many contributed generously to the newly established James Reeb Fund, the purpose of which is to provide for the needs of families both Negro and white who have suffered by reason of their involvement in this struggle...

I believe I knew Jim Reeb well enough to know that he would not have been pleased to have his name singled out for any special honor. many are the names, known and unknown, of those who have died in this cause ... Jim would have been proud if his sacrifice served to remind us that we all have a responsibility for the injustice and suffering that occurs in our communities, whether they be Selma, Alabama, or Albany,

New York.

Cardell did more than write this eloquent public letter. He traveled to Washington DC for a demonstration there and participated in getting a chapter of the Urban League started in Albany. The next year, you'd read about him in the paper protesting the Albany political machine buying votes with a five dollar gift for Democrats who voted.

Though Cardell did not go to Selma, he caught the spirit. Other ministers who were there, brought the spirit home to a congregation that didn't want to catch it. They hadn't had that powerful experience of Beloved Community and didn't understand the changes they saw in their minister bringing home a new found passion for change and community engagement.

They couldn't – or wouldn't – support that level of energy and commitment to racial justice work.

And then came the Black Power movement and controversy within our association. And then came the Pentagon Papers and awareness of the depravity of the Vietnam War. And then came the Gay and Lesbian liberation movement after Stonewall. And then came the women's movement and the fight for their rights.

Some place along the way, that fervor experienced in Selma was lost. And some important lessons in community organizing for effective change were neglected as well.

And this is why we need to return to Selma again, fifty years later. Those lessons come alive again when reading Mark Morrison-Reed's book. I'm so grateful he will be with us next weekend to help us find them again.

What are those lessons? Read his book and come to our joint service next Sunday (March 1st) and you'll find out.

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