Unitarian Universalists and Selma, 50 Years Ago

Rev. Roger Jones ~ March 1, 2015
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #123, Spirit of Life/Fuente de Amor in Spanish; #118, This Little Light of Mine; #169, We Shall Overcome; #201, Glory, Glory, Hallelujah.

Sermon

You can see their faces (or feel their faces) on a bronze-relief plaque on a wall of the chapel. Three models of courage and hope. Three martyrs for the right to vote. The plaque is in the headquarters building of our Unitarian Universalist Association, in Boston. Among many others murdered in the Civil Rights years were these three young adults: Viola Liuzzo and the Reverend James Reeb, both UUs, and Jimmie Lee Jackson, who was not a UU. All three perished in Selma 50 years ago. The Civil Rights Movement was a black movement, led by blacks and carried out by ordinary African Americans. Yet many white allies showed up and stood up along with them—some sooner, some later. It was events in Selma that brought Unitarian Universalists into participation as allies in that movement.

In the summer of 1964, in the heat and humidity of the Deep South, volunteers were helping to register African Americans to vote (Morrison-Reed, 95)[1]. The recent movie "Selma" depicts the so-called literacy tests used by election officials to deny registration to blacks and intimidate them. Hundreds of black and white volunteers came to help. This included several UU ministers, lay leaders, seminarians, and college students. After the summer, when many volunteers went home, white vigilantes attacked their black neighbors in reprisal for that activism.

The Reverend Charles Blackburn, from the UU church in Huntsville, Alabama, recalled:
"We received instructions on techniques for driving civil rights workers: disconnect all interior lights of the car so as not to provide a clear target at night, drive down the center of the highway… to thwart moves to run you off the road."

One day in a small Mississippi town, Blackburn escorted "a 94-year-old black Baptist minister and his 80-year-old wife to the [courthouse] to register." He said: "We were arrested for trespassing on courthouse grounds (95)."

Registering to vote seems like such a simple matter these days, yet so many people choose to skip signing up. Today, half of those registered skip voting on election day. It is taken for granted, and its power, ignored. However, to people under the burden of oppression, voting can bring power, freedom, and pride. In 1965, the city of Selma had 30,000 residents, half black and half white. On the rolls were 12,000 white voters but only 325 black voters. For this reason, in January and February of 1965 there were three marches from a black church in Selma to the county courthouse, leading to arrests by police and assaults by newly deputized whites with cattle prods and billy clubs (96).

A few days later, during an evening rally, in Marion, Mississippi, Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young black veteran of the Army, was trying to protect his mother and grandfather "while a [state] trooper was beating them." He was shot twice in the stomach, and died a week later. The Sunday after his death, a Methodist minister called for a march from Selma to the state capitol in Montgomery. For the first time, dozens of white allies joined such a march; half of them came from three UU churches in other Alabama cities.

To leave Selma, you have to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Standing at the base of it, you can't see over it. What awaited those 600 marchers on the other side were sheriff's deputies, deputized vigilantes, and state troopers, some "on horseback." As recounted in a recent book by UU minister and scholar Mark Morrison-Reed, these men "charged, trampled, clubbed, and tear gassed 600 peaceful" marchers. (99) Traumatized, the marchers turned back.

Unlike other violence against peaceful protestors, this day, March 8, known as-Bloody Sunday, was covered by the news on TV. Early Monday morning, Dr. Martin Luther King issued a telegram calling on clergy of all faiths to come to Alabama for another march to the capital city. The Unitarian Universalist Association, the UUA, was four years old, since the Universalists and Unitarians had merged only in 1961. Dana Greely, the UUA president, wrote instructions to Homer Jack, the head of the Social Responsibility Department: "Alert some of our men to go" (99)

He also instructed the UUA's District Executives to telephone their ministers. Theodore Webb oversaw the churches in the Boston district. This was five years before Ted would come here to Sacramento to be our minister. Ted phoned the Reverend James Reeb, a young minister with whom he had had dinner the night before. Originally a Presbyterian minister, Jim Reeb had become a UU. He'd served on the staff of a UU church in Washington, then as a campus minister, and then as a community minister in poor neighborhoods of Boston. He had just begun a job at the American Friends Service Committee. Reeb felt called. He had to go to Selma. (99)

Some clergy couldn't afford to go. One of them was the Reverend Clark Olsen, serving the new UU Fellowship in downtown Berkeley, California. He listened to Martin Luther King on the car radio, and wanted to go. He arrived home to a message that a couple of church families would contribute money for his plane ticket (100).

The movement's home base in Selma was an African Methodist Episcopal church known as Brown Chapel AME. On Monday night, it was packed. Clergy from all over the country began arriving at Brown Chapel, greeted by cheers as they entered (100).

On Tuesday afternoon the UU volunteers met together (101). The Reverend-David Johnson, who had gone there from our Bloomington, Indiana, church has recalled: In less than two days, we had 1/10th of all our ministers in Selma. Yet, he said: "There was no room for pride…. We had come because we had to. We were late, very late, 12 years late." He noted that the first black voter registration drive had taken place in 1952. He said:

> They were beaten into submission, beaten on street corners, on the steps of the courthouse, in their own churches, in their own homes—and we did not notice.
> (101-102)

Training for the next weekend's march included lessons in nonviolent resistance. The Reverend Ford Lewis, minister of this congregation at the time, was there. In a later sermon here, he said: "We were told that if we were attacked we should fall down in [a] fetal position, but with our hands over our heads curled up in [a] ball…with our legs crossed; and remaining in that position, praying as they beat upon us." (102)

A federal judge issued an order against the second march. The White House asked Martin Luther King not to move ahead. There were disputes among the leaders of the movement. There was risk. Some people had been wounded in the previous march, and yet they were ready to try again. Others had much to lose. For example, some UUs from Huntsville, Alabama, worked for the space program and had government security clearances. Marching in violation of a court order could cost them their jobs (102).

And yet people showed up for this second march. Two thousand five hundred people walked and sang . . . . . "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'round." One UU marcher has recalled walking between an old black man with his arm in a sling and a teenage boy with a bandage on his head. Lining the road they walked were police cars, Confederate flags, and hecklers (103).

A federal marshal interrupted the march and read the court injunction. Still, they marched over the bridge and met a line of troopers blocking them. Martin Luther King kneeled to pray. Then the line of troops opened up. Instead of moving forward, King turned around and led the marchers back to where they'd started, to Brown Chapel AME (103).

Later, Dr. King explained that more white allies were on their way; it would bring more public attention and make state police reluctant to attack the group. James Reeb and his wife, Marie, had four small children in Boston. She was not happy about his decision to go to Selma. (99) Many church boards felt the same way about their ministers taking time away, while others were supportive. Many congregants said they had no business getting involved in civil rights work (165-168). Such ambivalence affected not only us, but every major denomination.

That evening, ministers James Reeb, Clark Olsen, and Orloff Miller from the UUA's campus ministry program walked to a black-owned restaurant for dinner. Afterward, they took a shortcut back to Brown Chapel. Four white men followed them, calling them names. They kept walking. Clark Olsen saw a club come down on Reeb's head. The gang threw the other two on the ground, began kicking them, then ran away. The attack lasted half a minute. Olsen and Miller took Reeb to a black-run clinic, but he needed to be transported to the University hospital in Birmingham. White men followed their ambulance, then its tire blew out and its radio would not work. As the ministers waited with their injured friend/for a second ambulance to arrive, White men banged on the car windows. In a recent newspaper interview, Clark Olsen recalled:

> We had no idea what they were going to do… when Orloff and I had to get out of the car and move Jim's body to the second ambulance. One of them came up to me saying in a hostile tone of voice, "Hey, what happened here?" All I could bring myself to say was, Please don't."… They didn't stop us, there was no more hostility
> (Walton, A5).[2]

Waiting to meet them at the hospital in Birmingham were FBI agents and news reporters. (Walton, A5) President Lyndon Johnson sent yellow roses to the hospital. Reeb's wife and father were flown in from Boston. Reeb died of his brain injuries on Thursday. Around the country, marches, rallies, vigils and memorial services took place in the days and weeks that followed. That summer a new Unitarian Universalist Fellowship was established in Sacramento, serving the southern area of town. Like some other congregations founded in those years, it was named the James Reeb Fellowship (180). (It folded after several years of activity.)

On Sunday morning, three days after his death, preachers replaced their sermons with memorial services. At the UU church in Birmingham, the Reverend Larry McGinty pointed out that national attention surged after the sacrifice of this white minister, but there had been little notice weeks earlier, when Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot by a trooper. McGinty said Jimmie Lee Jackson was

> a human being, as was James Reeb and as are you and I. But … he was not a human being to this nation, to Southerners or to non-Southerners…. [Here] is the evil lurking in all of us, all across this country, North, East, South and West. (120)

Indeed, a researcher in the records of President Johnson's library later found there had been "57 recorded [phone] calls to Johnson about Reeb's death, but [there had been] none about the death of Jackson." (Walton A5).

More allies arrived in Selma for a memorial service led by Dr. King and the UUA president and a rabbi, among others.

Rallies took place constantly in Selma. UU minister Jim Hobart has recalled offerings being taken at the rallies "in a very Baptist style." He said people "came forth, placed their money or check in a basket held high by a tall and large Black preacher."

> At one rally, a man came up and said, almost defiantly, that he and other atheists had taken up a collection totaling $5,000…. [Without] any change of expression, the preacher looked out across the congregation and inquired, "Are there any other atheists here with $5,000?"

On Monday, President Lyndon Johnson addressed the U.S. Congress and the nation, urging passage of the Voting Rights Act. He said:

> At times, history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom…. [In Selma, Alabama, … long-suffering men and women peacefully protested the denial of their rights as Americans. Many of them were brutally assaulted. One good man—a man of God—was killed. (Walton A5)

A third march to Montgomery was in the works, and federal court approval came on March 17. The judge ruled that on the first and last days of the march, the number of marchers could be unlimited, "when they would be on a four-lane highway; but on the middle days [of the week]… the march would be limited" to 300 per day. (129) To keep them safe, President Johnson federalized 1,800 Alabama National Guardsmen, added two thousand more troops, and sent 100 FBI agents.

For the full 50-mile march, organizers signed up 300 of those who previously had been "beaten, jailed, [tear-] gassed or otherwise brutalized." The only UU allowed to march was James Bell, a young adult African American from a UU church in Philadelphia. But a UU seminarian from Chicago and a young minister from New York wanted to go the whole journey, so they followed behind those 300 as "uninvited guests." (132) Every night the marchers set up camp, often on muddy ground. They got up early every morning to march and rally again.

To arrive in Alabama for the final day of the march, black volunteers and their allies from around the country chartered buses, trains and planes. On the final day, the size of the march went up from its core of 300 people to 30,000. Among them were 250 UU ministers and 500 UU laypersons. (135) The closing rally featured spirituals and patriotic songs. Dr. King proclaimed it was clear that segregation was "on its deathbed in Alabama/ and the only thing uncertain about it [he said] is how costly the segregationists and [Governor] Wallace will make the funeral." (137).

Organizers had urged marchers to be ready to get out of Montgomery before night, before the National Guard left. After the rally, a young mother from Detroit shuttled carloads of marchers back to Selma. As she and a friend drove back to Montgomery for another run, a car pulled up beside hers and a man shot and killed her. (179) She was Viola Liuzzo. For just a year, she had been a new member of the UU church in the city of Detroit. She had been taking her children to church there. Viola Liuzzo's husband was still Roman Catholic, and he didn't approve of her UU involvement *or* her driving to Alabama. In Detroit, he had a Catholic funeral mass for Viola, attended by the Governor [George Romney}, the president of the autoworkers union [Water Reuther], Dr. King, and 750 other people (173). Leaders of the UUA sent letters of condolence for Viola's sacrifice. Two UU ministers called on her husband at home at two different times, but he turned them away (173).

It was not only Viola's husband who thought she had no business helping out in Selma. A few months later, a poll in the *Ladies' Home Journal* revealed only 26 percent of U.S. women approved of her actions, while 55 percent disapproved (158). She was one of the few white women able to go, who chose to go. She drove to Selma in response to her UU values and her faith community, which she had joined only a year earlier.

It took years before our denomination formally recognized her sacrifice in service to our shared principles (158). Next weekend, Unitarian Universalists and leaders of other faith traditions will gather in Selma to remember all of the martyrs/ and all of the marchers, and to march once again.

In the spring of 1965, the travelers to Selma wouldn't know how long they'd be there. Clark Olsen, the minister from Berkeley, had expected to be gone a day and packed a without a full change of clothing (100). They wouldn't know if they'd still have a job back at home. But neither did the marchers from Alabama. At least 200 African Americans *in* Alabama did lose their jobs as punishment for participating. The travelers couldn't know whether they would be safe. Dick Leonard, a minister of religious education from New York, packed his bag and left "instructions for his memorial service… just in case" (100).

The Alabama demonstration not only changed U.S. laws, it was a turning point in the life of our very white religious denomination. As Mark Morrison-Reed has noted, "Given the miniscule size of Unitarian Universalism compared" to other faiths, "it was well represented." We continue to struggle and work toward more inclusion in the ranks of our ministry and in our congregations.

The Selma story is too rich for one sermon, and of course the stories and the struggle for racial justice have continued well beyond 1965. There are so many perspectives to consider, so many points for discussion. For now, I take two lessons from this 50-year-old story.

The first lesson is one of humility. The leaders and the foot soldiers of the Civil Rights Movement did not always agree on their strategies. They could not be certain about their chances for success,/ or their survival. Yet their faith in a better future called to them. It kept them going. The Unitarian Universalists who joined in the struggle, in Selma, learned to approach the struggle not as wise rescuers or saviors but as allies, willing to learn from those demanding justice, willing to lend their voices and their bodies. Those UUs were not perfect people, just ordinary ones who made mistakes. Yet they showed up.

That is the second lesson. Showing up. No matter how imperfect we are, or how uncertain, we can choose to learn, to stretch ourselves, and to show up when asked. If we feel a calling to show up somewhere, we can show up. If called to stand up, then stand up; to speak out, then speak out; to give, then give.

In the days to come, may we not let the calling be unheard or unheeded. If we are invited to support others in fulfilling their own call to show up, let us do what we can to support them. May we not let the invitation go unheard,/ not let such a calling go unheeded.

In the days to come, let us go forward in memory and in gratitude. By our words and by our deeds, let us give thanks for the gifts of courage and hope we have received, give thanks for all the gifts that make life worth sharing. Amen.

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FOR FURTHER READING & DISCUSSION

"A Life Lesson from Hollywood," with reviews, reflections and discussion questions related to the movie "Selma," in the *UU World*:
http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/300703.shtml

"How the Black Lives Matter Movement Challenges Unitarian Universalists," *UU World* Spring 2015:
http://www.uuworld.org/ideas/articles/300703.shtml

Books related to Selma and other UU involvement in the Civil Rights struggle at the UUA Bookstore:
http://www.uuabookstore.org/Southern-Witness-P17570.aspx

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[1] Mark D. Morrison-Reed, *The Selma Awakening*. Boston, 2014, Skinner House Books, p. 95. Unless noted otherwise, all page-number citations are from this book, by an African American Unitarian Universalist. minister. Find it at http://www.uuabookstore.org/The-Selma-Awakening-P17456.aspx

[2] Beth Walton, "Yes, I Will Go." *Citizen-Times*, Asheville, N.C., January 18, 2015, p. A1-A5. Rev. Clark Olsen is retired in Asheville and was interviewed recently. Citations from this article include the name Walton and page number. Find it at http://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2015/01/17/march-selma-yes-will-go-asheville-man-said/21882351/