

**American Summer, 1963:
Grief and Gratitude for a History
of Courage, Sacrifice and Hope**

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: #389, Gathered Here; #407, We're Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table; #168, One More Step.

Sermon

Fifty years ago today, on a Sunday morning in Birmingham, Alabama, white Christian terrorists exploded a bomb at the 16th Street Baptist Church. A large African American church, it served as an organizing hub for the community. Four girls were killed in the blast. Dressed in white, they were planning to lead the 11:00 worship service for the adults. (Branch, 74-75)

Three of them were 14 years old:

Cynthia Wesley

Carole Robertson

Addie Mae Collins.

One was 11 years old:

Denise McNair.

[Silence].

Now a half-century old, the bombing stands out for its brutality.ⁱ That crime was one event in the pivotal years of the Civil Rights Movement. It was one event among many during the year 1963. In this country's history, that year was a roller-coaster ride of tragedy, victory, tragedy.

Though many non-religious allies took part in the Civil Rights Movement, it was a faith-based movement. Its "incubator and laboratory" was the southern black church. (Branch, 3) So says the historian Taylor Branch, who is a member of a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Black preachers provided leadership, wisdom, and people power. Nonviolent protest was the strategic advantage of the movement, and its spiritual power. Using direct action, ordinary people would bring an end to legal segregation in schools, public accommodations, and housing. They would win voting rights and civil rights protections. Facing down violence and hatred, ordinary people gave us a better country.

On this anniversary Sunday, let's recall some key moments of the summer of 1963. First, a little of the history leading up to it.

In 1954, the Supreme Court said that segregated public schools, among other segregated institutions, were unconstitutional.ⁱⁱ In 1957, President Eisenhower sent the military to Little Rock, Arkansas, "for a year / to enforce integration by the first nine Negro students at ... Central High School." (Branch, 14)ⁱⁱⁱ

In 1955, in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks refused a bus driver's order to move to the back and let a white passenger take her seat. Her arrest was not the first for such an offense, but local activists used the occasion to demand an end to segregation. African Americans organized carpools, walked to work or stayed home from work, to deny the bus company revenue.

In 1960, four students conducted a sit-in protest at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. This was not the first sit-in, but it caught fire. As days passed, more students arrived—white allies as well as black students. Older adults came to teach the discipline of nonviolent action. Sit-ins took place in 31 cities, in 8 states. The students were taunted by hostile whites, who dumped ashtrays and food on their heads. Yet they did not fight back. Dozens were put in jail. (Branch, 12-19)

I can imagine that, in spite of training, many students would be tempted to lash out. Three years ago here, an African American elder told our church's teenage youth group about his life in those years. Having grown up in the North, in New York City, he said that if someone had hit him, he would have hit them back. So, he said, he was not a suitable soldier for the nonviolent army.

Starting in 1961, the Freedom Riders tested the right of integrated bus travel across state lines. These were dangerous travels. On an Alabama road, riders were chased out of a bus by a mob setting fire to it. Another busload was attacked on its arrival in Birmingham. (Branch, 25)

The leaders of several civil rights organizations argued over tactics and coordination of their various campaigns. The most prominent leader was the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a young Baptist minister.

As the movement grew, its leaders pressed national politicians to enact civil rights laws and enforce equal access in southern cities and states.

President John Kennedy, however, depended on the political support of white southern Democrats, so he kept the black movement at bay. Using wiretaps and other means, the FBI spied on Dr. King and other movement organizers.

A primary tactic of nonviolent action was to raise the awareness and the discomfort of this nation's white majority about the brutality of segregation. However, many mainstream clergy, especially white clergy in the South, urged caution, moderation and patience. Our Unitarian Church in Birmingham was one of the exceptions. The Reverend Gordon Gibson told me a story about Eve Gerard, the long time church secretary in Birmingham. She answered the phone to hear yet another bomb threat against the Unitarian church. Before hanging up, Eve said: "You'll have to take a number; there are several people ahead of you."

In January of 1963, the movement seemed weak and faltering to Dr. King. He began planning "a showdown campaign in Birmingham." The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth recruited local pastors and congregations. The Reverend James Lawson trained people in nonviolent action. (Branch, 48) In April, demonstrations took place daily for the desegregation of businesses and public accommodations in Birmingham. Yet intimidation by police chief Eugene "Bull" Connor deflated the campaign. Even when Dr. King got himself arrested, it brought little attention.

On Good Friday, April 12, Dr. King was jailed in solitary confinement/ for eight days. A friend smuggled in a newspaper so King could read a "Call for Unity" published by six local ministers, a priest and a rabbi. These eight men were not in favor of segregation, but they attacked King's campaign/ as "unwise and untimely." (Westbrook, 22) King was furious. He wrote a reply, using the margins of the newspaper and other scraps and smuggled sheets of paper. King was writing not only to those eight men, but also to all of the white moderates in the country, including President Kennedy.

To the local clergy's criticism that he was an outsider, King recalled the Apostle Paul, who took the Gospel message around the Mediterranean. King was bringing the gospel of freedom, he explained. Furthermore, he was invited there.

He wrote: "I am in Birmingham because injustice exists here. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an

inescapable network of mutuality. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly." (Westbrook, 22)

To their advice to wait and be patient, he replied: "This 'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.'" He said: "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed."

To the charge of being extremist, King said yes.

"The question is not whether we will be extremists but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice?"

This "[Letter from the Birmingham Jail](#)" would become a piece of American scripture, but at the time, it did not convert the nation's conscience.

What did that was a children's campaign. Organizers recruited youth from Alabama families, and trained them. Some parents were outraged. Surely all of them were afraid for their children. Over several days, kids as young as six marched in the city, breaking the law. Chief Bull Connor held back at first, but then he "snapped." On his orders, police dogs attacked the young demonstrators. Water blasted from fire hoses, "pinn[ing] the children to the sides of buildings, shredding their clothes." Jail cells filled with kids. (Branch, 48-49)

As the nation watched in shock, Dr. King made a plea that the President "begin speaking of race as a moral issue." (Branch, 54)

President Kennedy decided to do just that. On Tuesday, June 11, Kennedy said he wanted to broadcast a speech to the nation that very night. Two hours before the speech, he gave his advisor and speechwriter Ted Sorenson some ideas for drafting a speech. Sorenson was a Unitarian Universalist, by the way. Kennedy tinkered with his draft, but he ad-libbed much of the speech. In it, he said civil rights is indeed a moral issue, one "as old as the Scriptures and as clear as the American Constitution." And he asked: "[Are] we to say to the world—and much more importantly, to each other—that this is the land of the free, except for Negroes?" (Branch, 54, 55) He pledged to pursue civil rights legislation. Dr. King and associates were elated.^{iv}

Hours after that speech, the activist Medgar Evers was killed in his driveway by an assassin. He was the field secretary for the NAACP in Jackson,

Mississippi. As he walked from his car to the door of his house, a bullet went through his back, and then “through his living room window.” His wife and three kids were inside. “True to their ... training in civil rights preparedness, [they hit] the floor. [When] no more shots came, they ran outside” and found him dying. (Branch, 56)

To “take advantage” of the attention now given to racial injustice, Dr. King proposed a mass protest in Washington, DC. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom took place on August 28. Its chief organizer was Bayard Rustin. He had been brought up by his maternal grandparents outside Philadelphia. They sent Bayard to Quaker schools, which taught him nonviolence. Rustin was a socialist and he was openly gay. So, to reduce the risk of discrediting the movement, he did his work of organizing the march behind the scenes.

Talk about organizing! On the morning of August 28, 21 chartered trains entered Washington, bringing black people and white allies. One hundred buses entered the city every hour. In spite of thorough preparations, the march and rally organizers knew that the African American community was on trial.

The government feared riots and looting. Should military suppression be necessary, the President had 4,000 troops at the ready in the suburbs, “backed by 15,000 paratroopers on alert in North Carolina.” The city of Washington banned the sale of liquor. Its hospitals cancelled non-urgent surgery. Yet the march and the rally went smoothly, even ahead of schedule. “Police recorded only four ... arrests, all of white people.” (Branch, 66) Later, Rustin would credit the success to the discipline of nonviolence, and also to the cooperation of the many civil rights organizations and their leaders. (Rustin, 271-3)

^vAmong the all-male speaking lineup at the rally was a young student activist, John Lewis. He now serves as a Congressman from Georgia. Later on Dr. King read a prepared speech. It ended with words from the Prophet Amos: “We will not be satisfied until justice runs down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Behind him, the singer “Mahalia Jackson piped up / as though in church, ‘Tell ‘em about the dream, Martin.’” He did. (Branch, 65)

He left his text behind, and said: “I have a dream.” Riffing on “My Country ‘Tis of Thee,” he

chanted, “From every mountainside, let freedom ring.”

In closing, he envisioned ... “that day when *all* God’s children... will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!’” (Branch, 65)

Two weeks later, in Huntsville, a six-year-old boy became Alabama’s first black student in a previously segregated school.

Two and a half weeks after the march was the bombing of the Birmingham church. Those four girls were in the ladies’ room after Sunday School, / before the church service. They were discussing the lesson “The Love that Heals.” (Branch, 72)

After the explosion, Denise McNair’s mother “stumbled” outside to search for her only child. She came upon her own father, sobbing. “Daddy, I can’t find Denise!” He replied: “She’s dead, baby,” and he held up a girl’s white dress shoe. He screamed: “I’d like to blow the whole town up!” (Branch, 73)

But he didn’t. Though some black and white young men did fight after the blast, only blacks died, one boy shot by white Eagle Scouts and another by the police. (Branch, 73-74)

While preaching at the funeral of three of the girls, over their open caskets, Dr. King affirmed the movement’s gospel. He said: “We must not lose faith/ in our white brothers. Somehow we must believe that the most misguided among them can learn to respect the dignity and worth of all human personality.” (Branch, 75)

Though civil rights leaders were in mourning, they would not retreat. Diane Nash proposed raising an “army across the entire state of Alabama to converge on Montgomery” to demand full voting rights and to register voters. (Branch, 75) Rustin pushed for a national day of mourning, to take place one Sunday after the bombing.

On September 22, coming out of the shadows, Rustin spoke to a New York rally of 10,000 people. (Rustin, 274-275) He said, “I call now for an uprising, nonviolently, in 100 cities where we will sit and stand and stand and sit and go to jail and jail again, until there are no color barriers.” (Rustin, 275) The only power available, he said, “is the power of black bodies, backed up by as many white bodies as will stand with us, to go into the streets...” (Rustin, 275)

Though many white allies joined the struggle, it was a black freedom struggle. It was envisioned, led and carried out by African Americans, as they claimed their full place in this democracy.

This is humbling to me. Because they wanted a better life, they put their bodies in the streets, jails, meeting halls and courthouses. They envisioned a better life for themselves and their children. They envisioned a better country. And with struggle, heartbreak, faith and love, they brought forth a better country.

If those ordinary Americans could overcome violence with discipline and with faith, then all of us today can have hope as we face our current challenges. Ordinary people can still bring forth a better country.

In the summer of 1963, the biggest victories of American Civil Rights legislation had not yet been achieved. Our country was in for yet more struggle and heartbreak. People would have to show more courage, and summon courage from one another.

What fueled that movement, spiritually? It was the discipline of nonviolent action, the dignity of self, and a faith in a God of love and justice.

A few years later, looking back, Dr. King said: "And then ol' Bull [Connor] would say as we kept moving, 'Turn on the fire hose,' and they did turn 'em on. But what they didn't know/ was that we had a fire that no water would put out."

This is African American history, but also it is a legacy for all of us. Let us behold it with gratitude. Let us receive it with hope. Let us keep moving toward the dream of peace and freedom. As we move into the days to come, let us be renewed by this legacy of courage, commitment, hope and love.

Amen.

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Footnotes

ⁱ The FBI identified four white men as the suspects. But the case was closed and opened over the years. One of each was convicted in 1977, 2001, and 2002. Each was sentenced to life in prison. A fourth man died in 1994 without a trial.

ⁱⁱ In its ruling in *Brown vs. the Board of Education*, it said the slogan of "separate but equal" was dishonest and impossible to achieve. Separate is inherently unequal.

ⁱⁱⁱ In 1960, in New Orleans, Ruby Bridges was escorted by the U.S. Marshall service to her first day of Kindergarten as the first black student. The parents of all the white children removed their kids, so she attended class all by herself.

^{iv} They had been planning a March on Washington for the summer. Kennedy's apparent conversion "underscored ... their decision to make [action by] Congress...the focus" of the March on Washington, rather than the President. (Branch, 56)

^v At 10 o'clock in the morning, four hours before the rally began, there was music: Among choirs and other singers were Joan Baez, Odetta, and Peter, Paul and Mary. Bob Dylan sang his ballad about the death of Medgar Evers. (Branch, 62)