

## **Is there nothing you would die for?**

A story and sermon delivered March 22, 2009

By Bill Johnston, chair, Social Justice Committee

### **Selma, March 1965**

My interest in this story begins with a question: “Is there nothing worth risking the end of one’s life for? Are there no dreams or goals so important that we can risk our own destruction to gain them?”

The Rev. James Reeb asked that question in one of his first sermons at the large All Souls Church, Unitarian, in Washington, D.C. He served as assistant and then associate minister there from 1959 to 1964. He answered in part when he joined the campaign for voting rights in Selma, Alabama in 1965, where hundreds of other Unitarian Universalists and thousands of men and women, black and white, marched together for justice, 44 years ago this week.

By 1965, legal segregation in the South was on the defensive, the result of court decisions, federal laws and a decade of direct action.

But most blacks were still barred from registering to vote, by intimidation and other tactics. Selma was typical. Only about 300 of its 15,000 blacks were registered to vote. No blacks were registered in some neighbouring largely black counties. And between brutal cops and the Klan, life was dangerous for those who challenged the status quo. A seasoned black community organizer had been warned by friends not to go to Selma because “in Selma the white people were too mean and the black people were too scared.”

Martin Luther King Jr. came to Selma on Jan. 2, 1965 to launch a campaign to register black voters. Repeated mass marches to register voters were met with police violence or arrests for violating bans on mass meetings and parades. Some 3,000 people were jailed, including King and a couple of Unitarian Universalist ministers working with the campaign.

Police brutality escalated on Feb. 18, in nearby Marion, where a nighttime march was viciously suppressed. Jimmie Lee Jackson, 26, a deacon in his church who had done a stint in the armed forces and now worked in the local hospital, was at the march with his mother and 82-year-old grandfather. Both of them were beaten. Jackson was shot trying to protect his mother. Eight days later, he died.

Jackson’s death sparked the idea of a march from Selma 50 miles to the state capital of Montgomery to demand change from Gov. George Wallace.

On Sunday March 7, 600 set out on that march and it too was crushed. Participants were beaten, teargassed and whipped by police on horseback. This time, however, the violence occurred in daylight and was captured by news cameras. Ironically, that outburst of police violence saved what had become a badly organized and divided campaign. People across the continent were shocked at the brutality of what was called Bloody Sunday. “It is estimated that more than 48 million Americans watched those horrific scenes” on TV, author Gary May said. “In the days that followed Bloody Sunday, demonstrators calling for the swift passage of a voting rights act marched in more than eighty cities.” A thousand miles to the north, the board of this congregation sent a telegram to President Lyndon Johnson, urging federal action to protect those fighting for democratic rights in the South.

That night, King called on clergy of all denominations to come to Selma to join the march and hundreds responded, including several dozen Unitarians, among them James Reeb.

Reeb, then 38, had been a Presbyterian minister working as a hospital chaplain and then a YMCA youth director before becoming a Unitarian minister. He felt called to serve those most in need and was deeply committed to racial justice. He divided his time in Washington between ministering to his congregation and heading a huge community project in the black neighbourhoods around All Souls. In 1964, he took a significant pay cut to go to work fulltime in the black ghetto of Boston and moved there with his wife Marie and four children.

When the Unitarian Universalist Association asked him to go to Selma, Marie asked him not to go. But she relented when he insisted, "I belong there. It's the kind of fight I believe in."

On Tuesday March 9, Reeb and two other Unitarian ministers were jumped by white thugs as they left a restaurant in Selma. One swung a club and cracked Reeb's skull. Two days later, he died.

His death touched a nerve in America that Jimmie Lee Jackson's hadn't. There were more demonstrations for federal action. From across the continent, clergy and others flooded into Selma. It's estimated that 500 Unitarian Universalists at one time or other joined the Selma campaign, including one fifth of our clergy. The board of the Unitarian Universalist Association, meeting in Boston, adjourned its meeting to reconvene it in Selma. UU minister Victor Carpenter later wrote that "No other denomination could or did make such a profound statement of denominational solidarity with the Civil Rights Movement or such an affirmation of the movement's black leadership."

The minister of this congregation at the time, Robert Hemstreet, left Friday night for Selma with Arnold Thaw, minister from the South Peel Unitarian congregation. "Our physical presence is needed," Hemstreet said in a fascinating letter to the congregation reprinted in your order of service.

A carload from the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto went down. A rabbi and five Christian ministers from Hamilton went too, and later commented on the palpable hatred directed their way by whites.

Hemstreet stayed in the south for only a few days. Arnold Thaw stayed longer and was arrested during a demonstration. "As I sat in that dirty Selma jail," he said later, "I was possessed by two feelings: (1) fear, not knowing what was going to happen to me next in that dark jail — but (2) certainty that I was doing what was right and that I didn't want to be anywhere else."

On Monday, March 15, Brown Chapel in Selma was jammed for Reeb's funeral. King delivered the eulogy. Praising Reeb as a martyr, King asked, as he had at Jackson's funeral, not who but *what* killed this good man. He mentioned hate mongering politicians, brutal police, a timid federal government, blacks who stayed on the sidelines. He went further. "James Reeb was murdered by the indifference of every minister of the gospel who has remained silent behind the safe security of stained glass windows. He was murdered by the irrelevancy of a church that will stand amid social evil and serve as a taillight rather than a headlight, an echo rather than a voice."

President Johnson spoke that night to a rare joint session of the Congress and asked congress to support a Voting Rights Act to ensure blacks got the vote to which they were entitled, to ensure that Reeb had not died in vain.

Shortly after Reeb's funeral, a federal judge ruled the march from Selma to Montgomery could proceed, with federal protection if necessary.

On March 21, about 3,000 people began the four-day march. Campsites were set up along the way. Security was tight. The marchers went through rain, cold, mud and then blistering sun. On March 25, the marchers and countless others, a huge crowd of 25,000 to 30,000, gathered at

the capital building in Montgomery. It was the largest march ever for civil rights in the South. It also marked the first time whites in large numbers moved beyond financial support to actually march with blacks. King hailed it as a great success that marked the beginning of the end of segregation. The troops and marchers departed for home.

But the work of hatred was not done.

Among those who came south to support the march was a Detroit mother of five named Viola Liuzzo. Liuzzo, 39, had grown up poor in the south and felt a kinship with the victims in Selma. Her best friend was a black woman from Mississippi, Sarah Evans.

In 1964, Liuzzo had become a Unitarian and she was a student at Wayne State University when she attended a demonstration in Detroit on March 16 to support the Selma marchers. She resolved to go to Selma, despite her family's protests. "I need to be there," she told her family. "It's everybody's fight." Leaving her children in Sarah Evans' care, Liuzzo drove 1,000 miles to Selma by herself.

She staffed a reception desk there for new arrivals, participated in part of the march, worked at a first aid station in Montgomery, helped care for a baby at the black home where she stayed. Father Tim Deasy of the Catholic church that hosted the final night of the march said he doubted if anyone among those who came to Selma matched her dedication.

After the march ended, Liuzzo kept a promise to drive some marchers back to Selma. Then she started back to Montgomery after dark, with Leroy Moton, a black man who'd been in charge of transportation. On the way, a car full of Ku Klux Klansmen pulled up beside her and 14 or 15 bullets were fired into her car, killing her instantly.

She was the only white woman to die during the entire civil rights movement.

As with Reeb, there was an outpouring of outrage at her death, and praise for another martyr. Sadly, there was also a backlash against her as a woman and mother. A large majority of respondents to a Ladies' Home Journal survey said she had no right to leave her five children to risk her life for a social cause.

But the deaths of Jackson, Reeb and Liuzzo were not in vain. On Aug. 6, President Johnson signed into law the Voting Rights Act that swept away many of the barriers to black voters and provided for federal registrars if necessary to ensure they could vote.

Southern juries acquitted both Reeb and Liuzzo's killers of murder. But in December 1965 a jury found Liuzzo's killers guilty of violating her civil rights, the first time in American history that a federal jury had found white men guilty of a crime against a civil rights worker. It set a precedent used often since.

Sadly, Selma turned out to be the high water mark for the movement.

Just five days after the Voting Rights Act was signed, the Watts section of Los Angeles exploded in a massive riot in which 500 square blocks were looted and burned and 34 people, 28 of them black, were killed. While the civil rights movement had focused on the South, northern blacks, legally free, also faced massive discrimination. In the late 1960s, almost 41 per cent of blacks lived in poverty, compared with about 12 per cent of Whites. Anger seethed in the repellent conditions of black slums. There were more riots in 1966 and 127 U.S. cities exploded in the summer of 1967.

Black leaders increasingly talked of black power, which generally meant two things: that blacks had the right to determine their own destinies and that blacks had a cultural tradition that is worthy of respect and pride.

Integration, or as close as any blacks got then, was also being challenged. Alex Poinsett, a longtime editor at Ebony magazine and a UU from Chicago, put it this way: "It had dawned on

us that you could not integrate elephants and gophers because of the unequal power relationship, the unlevel playing field. Also, integration was, in fact, a one-way movement of Black to White, an assimilation process in which African Americans, instead of affirming their unique gifts, became mere carbon copies of Whites. Indeed, integration as defined in the 1960s was cultural suicide.”

And white supporters began to desert and then resist the movement. King, in the 1966 Massey lecture on CBC radio, said, “Negroes were outraged by inequality; they ultimate goal was freedom. Most of the white majority were outraged by brutality; their goal was improvement, not freedom or equality.” Integrating lunch counters or allowing black to vote were OK, but when blacks sought more than token educational or economic advancement, King said, they met “outright resistance” from whites.

Our Unitarian Universalist movement also struggled. At a Unitarian Universalist Association conference in the fall of 1967 to consider a response to the riots, 30 of the 37 blacks present withdrew to form a caucus closed to whites. The mother of Mark Morrison Reed, our speaker here March 1, was among them. For many of the blacks, this was exhilarating. No longer were they expected to explain blacks to the white majority. Instead, they could to explore their identity as religious liberals to each other, black to black.

The black caucus then demanded several things. They demanded creation of a black-dominated Black Affairs Council to speak for the black community and to be funded for a quarter of a million dollars a year for four years. An all-black caucus would name the members. The money would be used to implement programs to improve the conditions of black UUs and black people generally in America.

That demand was approved during a heated debate at the General Assembly in 1968, by an 836-327 vote, and reconfirmed at an even nastier General Assembly the next year, but only by a bare majority. When the UUA, facing a deep deficit, made drastic budget cuts in 1970, it also trimmed the contribution to the Black Affairs Council to \$200,000 from \$250,000 and extended the payment period to five years, not four. In anger, the Council disaffiliated from the UUA. It ultimately faced internal division and it and its work faded away.

The issue for supporters of the council was accepting black leadership and they hailed the 1968 and 1969 decisions as among the proudest in our history and another example of our pioneering work in race relations. But there were bitter divisions. A separate group, committed to integrated means as well as ends, formed and sparked a bitter clash based on principles. There was even more rancour over tactics. Nonnegotiable demands appalled many UUs. So did tactics that included a walkout from the 1969 General Assembly and seizing microphones to prevent debate. Families were divided, friendships broken. Pat Keefe was this congregation’s delegate to the Cleveland convention and called it an awful experience. She told me that people were actually hateful towards each other. It must be emphasized that blacks and whites found themselves on both sides of all of these issues.

A majority of black UUs, about a thousand, left the UUA after the cuts, among them a youth leader named Bill Sinkford. It would be 1981 before a General Assembly would again tackle a resolution on racial justice.

But healing began when the UUA published a study of the whole affair, did an institutional racism audit, initiated anti-racist education programs and created an advocate for racial inclusion and an office for racial and cultural diversity. Bill Sinkford returned to our movement in the early 1980s and in 2001 he was elected UUA president, the first African American to head a historically white denomination in the U.S. The same year, Mark Morrison-

Reed became the first African-Canadian president of the Canadian Unitarian Council. (I have to note that the United Church of Canada elected an African Canadian as its leader in 1974.)

So there's a tinge of the bittersweet as we Unitarian Universalist look back to Selma. We were not able to sustain the surge of good intentions that arose from our participation there. But when called to Selma, we went, we paid a disproportionate price for our witness and we were part of a campaign that had real impact, ushering in historic changes.

Unitarian Universalist minister Clark Olsen, who was with Reeb the night he was hit, said the lesson he draws from Selma is this, that "despite possible tragedy, one can seldom predict the good that may come forth when a person chooses to stand for what is right and just — whether it be in the schoolyard or on the playing fields of social change."

Blacks are still a long way from equality, but a huge step was taken last Nov. 4, when the people of the United States voted a black man into the highest office in the land. On that day, the UUA sent flowers, bouquets of yellow roses, to James Reeb's widow and to his children and to Viola Liuzzo's children, in loving memory and in recognition of their lasting influence on their country. Liuzzo's youngest, Sally, just six when her mother was killed, wrote back:

"My daughters who are 19, identical twins born [on an anniversary of my mother's death]..... were able to vote for the very first time.... to help elect Barack Obama. Sarah ... one of the twins, lives in Chicago and was not yet registered to vote there. She flew home to Detroit just to be able to vote for Barack.

"I cannot begin to explain the sense of pride I have right now for my mother and all the civil rights activists of that time. I feel like everything they have fought for has now been realized. Black children will no longer feel like they are 'less than' and they will now know ... they can be ANYTHING they set their minds out to be."

"Here I am crying again," Sally wrote. "Thank you from my sisters and I for never forgetting our mother. The three of us were totally overcome with emotion. I feel like mom's sacrifice has now been worthwhile. Yes... she made a huge difference. I am so proud of America for getting past the limitations of race, and vote for what is best for our country."

## Sermon

The story of the Selma march is one of the favourite stories of Unitarian Universalists. Our participation is still a source of pride. That says something important about our self conception, our sense of who we are and what we are meant to do. It says we think the struggle for social justice is important. It says we believe in literally walking our talk. It says we want to make a difference.

I don't want to romanticize the Selma march. It was complex. Our role was limited and dominated by two horrible murders. But I'm fascinated by the event as a lens to examine myself and to examine our religion, and I have reached a few conclusions, at least one of which surprised me.

In Selma, we responded at least as much to James Reeb's murder as to the fight for racial justice. Our motives were mixed. But motives are always mixed. You can't let yourself be paralyzed waiting for purity of motive or perfect preparation or perfect timing to act.

In Selma, we didn't organize the event. We weren't part of the years of work that prepared the groundwork for it. But we showed up. Often, just showing up is half the battle.

In Selma, success came only because of a series of unhappy accidents. It took the violence of the police in Marion and on Bloody Sunday and the brutality of the thugs who killed James Reeb to galvanize public support that forced the president and Congress to act. But unpredictability is typical of any effort for social change. The outcome is always uncertain. So you can't march because you expect to succeed, or you'll never start. You march because it's right.

In Selma, we were only there a short time, most of us for a few days. But we did respond, and we responded with a rare sense of urgency. It's easy to lose the sense of urgency that led Viola Liuzzo to say: "There are too many people who just stand around talking. I'm going." We Unitarian Universalists are generally a pretty privileged lot. It can be difficult for us to challenge a status quo that serves us well. It can be easy to be patient with oppression that we don't feel and indeed, that we may profit from. The key to maintaining an appropriate sense of urgency is working with the oppressed, as equals.

And in Selma, we got that right. UU minister Victor Carpenter notes that "white Unitarian Universalists in Selma were taking their marching orders not from King directly, but from rank-and-file southern blacks who were occupying positions of civil rights leadership and whose authority was affirmed by whites."

Sadly, post-Selma, as Unitarian Universalists struggled with how to continue to respond to the oppression of blacks in America, at least one interpretation of what happened is that we found it difficult to determine what accepting black leadership meant and we lost our way for a time on the issue. We stumbled over the issue of power. At the heart of injustice is unequal power; achieving justice requires a transfer of power from the privileged to the underprivileged, from the oppressor to the oppressed, as Sharon Welch writes in her brilliant book *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*. She says we need to risk real dialogue with victims of injustice, dialogue that can change us, dialogue that widens our circle of caring. And as we do this, we will lose patience with anything that hurts any of this expanded group of "us" and will find the sense of urgency I mentioned earlier. It had been my hope that some of our social justice projects in this church, Out of the Cold and the north end Land's Inlet project, for instance, might have led to such dialogue, but it's been limited.

In Selma, as in all of the civil rights campaigns to that point, action was grounded in religious faith. The commitment to the dignity of every person that is enshrined in our first principle was a conviction Martin Luther King Jr. and others derived from their belief in a God who loves all his people, black or white. They gained real strength to face violence from their faith in a God who works with people toward achieving the Beloved Community of true equality, which we describe in our sixth principle as a "world community with peace, liberty and justice for all." The movement was lived religion. Black theologian James Cone has written that "King's theology was *embodied in his life*," a wonderful phrase.

UU Minister Peter Morales has suggested that we Unitarian Universalists undermine our ability to fight injustice, to be a prophetic voice, in part because we too often separate spirituality and work for social justice. He was referring to spiritual practices that become a form of escapism. But those working on social justice can also be dismissive of spirituality. I've been guilty of that. The truth is, there is no split. Just as we cannot divorce our own physical health from the health of a polluted world, so we cannot achieve spiritual health in an unjust world. But conversely, work for social justice needs to be grounded in the work of spiritual sustenance or it will burn out or lead to self-righteousness and bitterness.

A wise guide to spirituality, Ronald Rolheiser, obliterates the distinction between so-called spiritual practices and social justice work by talking of four non-negotiable essentials to spirituality: private morality and prayer or meditation, cultivating gratitude, work for social justice and participation in a faith community. Minus any one of the four, our spiritual lives are unbalanced.

A wonderful expression of the link between spirituality and social action comes from Sharon Welch: “Work for justice is not incidental to one’s life, but is an essential aspect of affirming the delight and wonder of being alive.”

Many of the civil rights activists not only embodied their spirituality, but their action fed their spirit. The most limiting, and spirituality damaging, force in the South was blacks’ own fear. But the more they stood up and challenged those who oppressed them, the less they feared them and the less imposing their enemies seemed. It was spiritual transformation, through action. Importantly, courage is as contagious as fear.

Finally, in Selma, we Unitarian Universalists responded to the most urgent issue of the day. Then it was racial justice. The question for us is, what is our Selma, for you, for me, for us as a congregation? What challenges our conscience, what presents us with an urgent call to respond? That’s what James Reeb’s question is really about. To ask what we are prepared to die for is to ask what we are prepared to live for.

The question accepts that life is risky, no matter what we do. Those committed to the civil rights movement calmed their fears of injury or death with the thought that if they died, they’d at least die fighting for what they believed in and their deaths might help bring change.

The risks aren’t all on the side of action. Not to act also poses huge risks. Most obviously, evil triumphs if we stand by, in effect condoning wrongdoing by our silence. As important, *we* die a little bit each time we are silent in the face of evil, each time we don’t act, don’t speak out. Our spirit is at stake in our choices.

So are our dreams. More than 60 years ago, the great Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams said that the “element of commitment, of change of hearts, of decision, so much emphasized in the Gospels, has been neglected by religious liberalism, and that is the prime source of its enfeeblement. We liberals are largely an uncommitted and therefore a self-frustrating people.” Reeb’s question is all about commitment, about what we are prepared to commit our lives to.

But he didn’t see commitment to an ideal or cause as some heavy *duty*. He saw it as what makes life worthwhile, as what makes for true happiness.

He prefaced the question about risking one’s life with this sentence. “Man never has been willing and never shall be content *merely to live*.”

Reeb knew, as UU minister James Kubal-Komoto puts it, that “it is by commitment to worthy ideals that our lives gain their fullest meaning.”

If our attachment to the Selma story signals our desire to make a difference, Reeb’s question signals that it is in working to make a difference that we find our true joy.

For as playwright George Bernard Shaw once said, “The true *joy* in life is being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one.”