

Memories from Selma, Alabama
by Carl Ulrich
delivered at the Westwood Unitarian Congregation
Sunday Service on February 15, 2009

The March from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama in March of 1965 was a major changing point in the Civil Rights Movement in the US. In a sense it was the culmination of civil rights actions of the previous 11 years.

The first stage was set with the May 17th 1954 Supreme Court decision on desegregating public schools in the US.

It was followed in 1955 with the one year long Montgomery bus Boycott where Rosa Parks refused to sit in the back of the bus.

There were Lunch Counter sit ins in Greensboro NC in 1960.

The Freedom Rides in the early 60's to integrate inter state bus travel.

These non-violent actions were aimed at changing specific discriminatory practices in local situations.

Also.

The murder of Medgar Evers, a NAACP organizer, outside his home in Mississippi in June 1963

and

the bombing of the 16th St. Baptist Church in Birmingham that killed 4 teenage girls during a church service in September 1963 --- brought dramatic attention to the violence experienced by African Americans in the southern United States.

These were all national and international stories, but they did not act to galvanize any kind of broad response from the country. They corrected a specific local practice of discrimination. But they didn't really change the system. These pre Selma actions were important in showing the power of non-violent protest and in helping it to catch the imagination of those working for social change in the south and around the country.

Selma was different. It was directly aimed at building pressure to get Congress to pass a National Voting Rights Act that would eliminate the Jim Crow laws that were preventing Blacks from being able to register to vote in many southern states. The earlier Civil Rights act said that everyone over 21 had the right to vote, but each state still had the authority to regulate the registration process. For instance in Selma the registration office was only open for 2 days each month. This along with threats from the K K K and the White Citizens Council meant that less than 300 African Americans were registered in Selma out of a total population of 27,000 where a large majority were Black.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) formed after the Montgomery Bus Boycott, under the leadership of Dr. M L King, decided in late 1964 that Voting Rights was the issue to tackle to really make changes in the racist practices in the south. They picked Selma in Dade Count, Alabama,

because of the overwhelming majority of Black residents and the fact that they represented less than 1% of the registered voters..

-2-

It was also at this time that President Lyndon Johnson announced in his State of the Union message that Voting Rights legislation was a priority for his administration.

Jan 2 1965 Dr. King spoke at a rally at Browns Chapel in Selma to launch the campaign.

On Jan 22 Dr. King and 500 school children are arrested in Selma while 650 African Americans marched in the nearby town of Marion. Dr. Dana McLean Greeley, the president of the UUA send a telegram to King in jail praising him for his non-violence discipline. At this time two UU ministers, Ira Blalock and Gordon Gibson arrived in Selma to work with the SCLC.

On February 18 a night march in Marion, Alabama ends with a brutal attack by the police. Dozens are injured and 26 year old Jimmy Lee Jackson was killed by a state trooper.

In Response to Jackson's death the SCLC announced a protest march to Montgomery, the Capital of Alabama.

It was when this March began on March 7, 1965 that the marchers were beaten by the Sheriffs' posse with clubs and tear gas on the far side of the Edmund Pettus Bridge which leads out of Selma.

This was covered by national TV and became front page news across the country and the world because of the extreme violence portrayed and became known as Bloody Sunday.

Immediately after Bloody Sunday, Dr. King sent a telegram to the UUA and to other denominations asking for ministers and lay persons to come to Selma to join in the campaign. Some 40 UU ministers traveled to Selma the very next day and joined 450 other religious leaders and 2000 African Americans for a second attempt to march to Montgomery. They were stopped at the bridge and this time did not attempt to proceed. It was later that evening that three of these UU Ministers, James Reeb, Orloff Miller and Clark Olsen were about to enter a soul food diner when they were attacked by three white men with a baseball bat. Jim Reeb was seriously injured. Clark Olson describes that evening as follows:

"My Selma had been a mixture of anger, fear, sorrow, wonder, and pride. Anger about Jim Reeb's death, about those who attacked the three of us, and about the Alabama system of justice—including an all-white, all-male jury—that found innocent the three men who had been charged with killing Jim.

Selma was fear, reexperienced fairly often in telling friends or family about the events of that terrible night in Selma: the men coming across the street shouting angry words, carrying a club. Waiting at the clinic while the doctor examined Jim. Fearing Jim's death as he squeezed my hand more tightly as his head pain increased and before he sank into unconsciousness. Fearing for all of us when our ambulance had a flat tire just after leaving Selma's city limits on the way to the hospital in Birmingham, and the ambulance

radio telephone wouldn't work. Especially fearing when a car full of white men pulled up behind us on the country road, then followed us back to town while we drove on the rim

-3-

of our flat tire, headed for a phone that would bring a replacement ambulance. Fear turned to terror when the car full of men parked next to our waiting ambulance and walked around the ambulance knocking on the windows. I thought that they might bury us in a watery ditch that night, the same kind of ditch where the bodies of civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner had recently been found in Mississippi. And fear that Jim would die before we arrived at the Birmingham hospital."

Dr. King spoke at a special Memorial Service for James Reeb at Brown's Chapel in Selma on March 15. That same day, President Johnson spoke to a joint session of Congress and introduced the Voting Rights Bill.

At this time, I was living in Louisville Kentucky, serving as the minister of the Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church..After the death of James Reeb, more than 400 UU ministers from all over the US and Canada traveled to Selma for various periods of time over the 18 days of the campaign.

It was on March 15th that I went to Selma along with a member of the Thomas Jefferson Unitarian congregation. I made the decision on my own, but the Board and the congregation were for the most part comfortable with my participation.

Louisville is an interesting mix of northern and southern traditions. Kentucky was north of the Mason Dixon line, so it was on the Union side in the Civil War, but its traditions were more southern than northern. But in the 50^s and 60's a number of national companies moved to Louisville including Ford, Dupont, General Electric and this brought in a number of families from all over the US. Within the Thomas Jefferson Unitarian Church there was a good mix of old and new Louisville families.

There was no dissension among the members in terms of my going to Selma, but I think it was more difficult for them when I came back. While I was in Selma I was in contact with the news media back in Louisville giving reports on what was happening, so that it became a very public thing for the members. It was one thing to be for the rights of Blacks within the Thomas Jefferson church family, but it was not necessarily something one talked about with one's neighbors. The fact that their minister was supportive of Selma, put them on the line and did cause discomfort for some.

Arriving at the airport in Montgomery, I could feel the tension. It was clear to everyone that there were a lot of outsiders heading for Selma in the crowd and was easy to see the unwelcoming facial expressions. There were a number of individuals from Selma with cars to transport us to Selma some 50 miles away and this too made it obvious who we were and why we were there.

When we arrived in Selma we were taken in by African American families, mostly in the extensive housing projects there. You can imagine that it was a huge task to house and feed this huge number of outsiders who were descending on Selma.

-4-

From one day to the next, it was never clear when or if the real march would take place. Gov. George Wallace had declared any march illegal.

After the unsuccessful second attempt to march to Montgomery on March 9th, the SCLC applied to a Federal Court to overturn the Governor's prohibition. It was in anticipation of a march at some point that people were coming to Selma, but as time went on, some had to leave as others arrived..so it was quite a revolving door.

Of course with all of these people coming to Selma the organizers had to find activities to occupy these hundreds..at times thousands... of people. One afternoon it was decided that we would take a walk in a white neighborhood. I think there were about 300 of us, Black and white, who took this orderly walk, staying on the sidewalk. The Sheriff told us through loud speakers that this was illegal and asked us to disperse. When we did not, he arrested all of us.. They took us to a school gymnasium and kept us there overnight. Lying on the floor we covered every available space in the gym. The problem was they had no way to feed us and with so many people there the bathrooms were soon flooded. Finally in the middle of the next morning they let us all out. Throughout the time there was much singing and the mood was fairly positive, if uncomfortable.

One evening, it was decided to go to the town of Marion, 30 miles from Selma to hold a church service there and give support to that community. This is where Jimmy Lee Jackson was killed by a State Police in mid February. For me this was the one time that I was most fearful while in Selma. We traveled in a number of cars along a two lane highway. As I remember it the night was dark with no moon. The State Police were following us and a number of local cars with unfriendly whites. Needless to say in this situation, we did not see the police as being there to protect us....quite the contrary. At the church in Marion the wall facing the street, was made up mostly of glass windows.

We could see the lights of passing cars glancing off the windows throughout the service. It was an eerie feeling with the constant flashing of lights, knowing that the individuals in those cars were not happy with our presence. It was not hard to imagine that something might come crashing through at any time. Between the strong preaching and enthusiastic singing during this service the energy was like a narcotic for me, giving confidence and support... ..as naive or unrealistic as that might be.

After 5 days in Selma, and it was still uncertain when or if the March would begin, I returned to Louisville. I had promised the Board that I would be back for the Sunday Service. (Also at that time it was more the tradition that ministers in UU congregations speak most Sundays.)

There was a continual movement of people coming and leaving Selma, throughout the 18 days of the campaign. When the Federal Court finally ruled that the march could go ahead, it was to be limited to 300 people. To back up the Court Decision, President Johnson called in the National Guard and a number of FBI agents to give protection to the marchers.

-5-

The March finally began on March 21 with the group traveling 12 miles a day and taking 5 days to reach Montgomery. On the last day over 25000 people joined the march as it walked to the State Capital in Montgomery.

On the last day of the March Viola Gregg Liuzzo, a UU lay person from the Detroit UU Church, was killed. She was driving to Montgomery to pick up marchers and bring them back to Selma. She was killed by four Ku Klux Klansmen. It turned out that one of the men was an FBI undercover agent. At their trial, he testified against the other three, but they were acquitted.

What I take from the experience of participating in the Selma Campaign.

Certainly in retrospect it was a privilege to have been able to participate and to have had the freedom to do this with the support of the T J Unitarian Church..

As a denomination, we take a lot of pride in the effort that we in the UU community devoted to the Selma March and I would in no way demean it. But the really brave people in this were the Black citizens of Selma, who took us into their homes. and took a stand in their own community, knowing that we outsiders would soon be leaving and that they would still be facing some of their same problems alone.

Within a few years Selma was able to elect Black citizens to its city council, but it was not until the late 90's that they were finally able to unseat the white mayor who had served in that position since 1965. And this only happened after the federal government stepped in and actually supervised the mayoralty election. This in a city where the overwhelming majority of the residents are Black.

We remember the huge sacrifice that James Reeb, Viola Liuzzo and their families gave with their deaths.

Throughout the south there are now thousands of elected African American officials at the local, state and national levels as a result of the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Bill signed into law 5 months after the Selma March.

It was tragic that it took the death of James Reeb, a white male minister to really mobilize the President, The Congress and even our UU denomination to take unprecedented action. For it was his death and the national publicity surrounding it, that mobilized the thousands of people to go to Selma.

We, and the rest of the country did not have the same reaction at the death of Jimmy Lee Jackson a few weeks earlier, not to mention the years and years of vigilante hangings of hundreds of Blacks in the south.

I am also reminded of Anne Barker's sermon earlier this month on Pride and Prejudice, where she described how our denomination has not had a stellar history in recruiting and accepting African American ministers to serve in our churches. We need to remember this, lest we become too comfortable with our history.

Lastly I take hope that change is possible, be it ever so slow in the time we experience as individuals. However, I don't think that many of us in 1965 could have imagined that US voters would overwhelmingly choose a Black President in our life time --- and its not just that he is African American, but that he represents the possibility of a very different kind of country, --- one that gives hope not only to the better inclinations of the United States, but also to a large part of the rest of the world. And from this I take hope.