

The Selma Awakening

Rev. Tim Temerson

UU Church of Akron

January 18, 2015

Part One

March 7, 1965. Bloody Sunday in Selma, Alabama. 600 mostly African American protesters marching across the Edmund Pettis Bridge are viciously attacked by local police and state troopers. Dozens are injured; some seriously. Images of the violence flash across television screens throughout the nation, leading to an outpouring of moral outrage and commitment never before seen in the history of our nation. The next day, Dr. King issues his call to Selma, urging people from all faiths, all races, and all walks of life to come to Selma. Thousands answer that call.

Among those coming to Selma in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday are hundreds of Unitarian Universalists. They are ministers, seminary students, and lay people. They are men and women, young and old, black and white, committed social activists and people participating in their very protest. It is estimated that by the end of the protests some two weeks later, 250 UU clergy and over 500 lay people had journeyed to Selma. Two of those Unitarian Universalists, Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, tragically lose their lives.

The story of Unitarian Universalism's role in Selma is the subject of a wonderful new book by Mark Morrison-Reed called *The Selma Awakening*. For those who may not be familiar with him, Mark Morrison-Reed is a Unitarian Universalist minister and scholar. Now retired from parish ministry, Mark is the foremost historian of Unitarian Universalism's relationship with and response to race and racism. The book will be for sale today after church. I should also mention that we have copies of Rev. Richard Leonard's first-hand account of his experience in Selma, *Call to Selma*. Both books are highly recommended.

Today I want to tell you about Unitarian Universalism's experience in Selma through the lens of Mark Morrison-Read's extraordinary book. What makes this book so important is not just the compelling story it tells about what happened in Selma but also

the way Morrison-Reed weaves that story into the broader narrative of Unitarian Universalism's experience and struggles with race and racism.

And as the book makes clear, Selma was a turning point and a tipping point in the history of our faith tradition. Prior to Selma, Unitarians, Universalists, and then Unitarian Universalists proclaimed their commitment to civil rights and racial justice. We espoused values of universal love and brotherhood and the dignity and worth of all people. And those proclamations and values led to some significant actions, like the leadership and involvement of both Unitarians and Universalists in the movement to abolish slavery prior to the Civil War.

But it was in Selma that, for the first time in our history, Unitarian Universalists not only joined a racial justice movement in significant numbers but also risked their lives for that movement. Rather than remaining behind the safety of stained glass windows, hundreds of Unitarian Universalists left their homes and churches, journeyed to a dangerous and unfamiliar place, and risked their lives for something greater than themselves. And as I said before, two Unitarian Universalist lives were lost.

Why did they go? Why did so many Unitarian Universalists, including James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, drop everything and risk their lives in journeying to Selma? Part of the answer, I think, can be found in the words and explanations of these two martyred heroes. When asked why he was going to Selma, Reeb simply said, "It's a fight I believe in." Liuzzo, who had become a Unitarian Universalist only a year before going to Selma, told her husband that she had to go to Selma because, "It's everybody's fight. There are too many people just standing around talking."

I want to take a moment to share with you the stories of Reeb and Liuzzo. But before I do that, I want to remember the sacrifice and martyrdom of Jimmie Lee Jackson, an African American protester and army veteran shot and killed three weeks before Bloody Sunday while trying to shield his mother and grandfather from a club wielding Alabama State Trooper. Jackson's death went largely unnoticed by the national media and is too frequently left out of or minimized in histories of the Civil Rights movement. I am very pleased and proud to say that Unitarian Universalism has helped correct this injustice by erecting a plaque to Reeb, Liuzzo, and Jackson at our headquarters in Boston.

Rev. James Reeb's journey to Selma turned out to be the final chapter in a life devoted to justice and service to others. Reeb had recently left his position as Associate Minister at the All Souls Unitarian Universalist congregation in Washington D.C. to work as a community minister and activist in a poor, largely African America neighborhood in Boston. Similarly, Viola Luizzo had been active in social justice work and causes in her native Detroit long before becoming a UU and going to Selma.

For those not familiar with the tragic details, Reeb and two other Unitarian Universalist ministers Clark Olson and Orloff Miller, were attacked two days after Bloody Sunday as they left a restaurant in Selma. Reeb suffered what turned out to be a fatal head injury and died two days later. Dr. King led Reeb's memorial service in Selma.

James Reeb's murder made national headlines and was a key turning point in President Lyndon Johnson's decision to push for immediate passage of voting rights legislation. And Johnson signed what eventually became the Voting Rights Act of 1965 later that summer.

Viola Liuzzo's murder received much less attention from the national media. She was killed two weeks after Reeb while driving several protesters back to Selma after the historic march from Selma to Montgomery had, at long last, been completed. Her memorial service took place several days later in Detroit.

We Unitarian Universalists often assume that our involvement in Selma was automatic or inevitable given our core values and long-standing commitment to social justice. But as Mark Morrison-Reed points out, in the years prior to Selma that commitment and those values did not always translate into meaningful action. In fact, when it came to the struggle for racial justice, right up until the moment Reeb, Luizzo and so many other UUs went to Selma, there was a disparity and disconnect between what Morrison-Reed calls Unitarian Universalism's "espoused values" and our "values in practice."

Far from standing at the forefront of racial justice and inclusiveness, at the time of Selma Unitarian Universalism was a religion of white privilege with an almost exclusively Euro-American world view. To cite just a few of the many examples Morrison-Reed points to, worship and music were devoid of materials that reflected the African

American experience, religious education curricula rarely touched on African American achievements, and many congregations, including this one, had moved or were moving from urban locations to suburban communities that were largely white and privileged. When it came to racial justice, Unitarian Universalism was a faith that too often said the right things without matching those words with deeds.

But in spite of all those things that kept Unitarian Universalism largely white and privileged, other forces were emerging that made our journey to Selma possible. As Morrison-Reed argues and as the words of James Reeb and Viola Luizzo you heard earlier make clear, Unitarian Universalists were stirred to action by the human rights and civil rights revolutions taking place around them. The values at the heart of those revolutions – freedom and equality, human dignity and beloved community – were and still are the values at the heart of our faith. Unitarian Universalists simply could not sit back when everything they stood for was so clearly and dramatically at stake. In those images from the Edmund Pettis Bridge on Bloody Sunday, Unitarian Universalism was confronted so clearly with a challenge to the very values and principles it held and holds dear. So many who journeyed to Selma felt that they could not call themselves Unitarian Universalist and accept what was happening in Selma. As Viola Luizzo said so well, “this was everybody’s fight!”

So they came. They came by bus and by car, by plane and by train. And they protested and they marched by the hundreds. From Bloody Sunday to the culmination of the campaign at the end of the Selma to Montgomery march, Unitarian Universalists stood up and spoke out. For the first time in most of their lives, they became part of a movement which was led by people of color and part of a movement which was truly working and sacrificing on behalf of their most cherished values. Over the course of their time in Selma, Unitarian Universalists listened, learned, sacrificed, and gave their lives. In the next part of the sermon, we will explore the impact Selma had on those Unitarian Universalists who went and the meaning Selma has today as we strive to live those same values in a world in which so much has changed and so much has stayed the same.

Part Two

As you heard in our reading from Mark Morrison-Reed, Selma had an extraordinary impact on Unitarian Universalism. Those who went to Selma were forever changed. For the first time in many of their lives, what they believed in and how they acted in the world were in harmony. Belief and action, soul and role, became one. There was no gap between head and heart, between body and spirit. As Morrison-Reed says, the Unitarian Universalists who went to Selma experienced what it is like to be whole.

I can't begin to do justice to the beautiful memories and descriptions Morrison-Reed provides of the countless Unitarian Universalist experiences in Selma. You really need to read them for yourself. One after another Morrison-Read recounts the experiences of Unitarian Universalists who went to change the world but who, much to their surprise, ended up being changed and transformed themselves. Their minds and bodies and spirits were opened to a reality that was so different from anything they had experienced before.

And this experience, this learning, this transformation experienced by those who went to Selma forever changed Unitarian Universalism. For one thing, Selma changed the way we understand the meaning and purpose of social justice. In Selma, Unitarian Universalism learned that social justice is as much if not more about listening as it is about talking, as much about following as it is leading, as much about feeling and emotion as it is about reason or rationality, as much about showing up and taking risks as it is about passing resolutions and signing petitions, and as much about being in relationship and standing in solidarity with those we are seeking to help rather than standing above them or telling them what to do. Those were the lessons and that was the "Spirit of Selma."

And thanks to Selma, that spirit of listening and learning, of showing up and taking risks, and of building relationships and standing in solidarity has become the model for social action in Unitarian Universalism. Not that we don't still pass earnest resolutions or sign petitions. But over the years we have come to understand that working for social justice must begin from a place of humility, from recognition that we don't have all the answers, and from a place of trust and relationship. That is certainly

something we have learned and are trying to embody here at the UU Church of Akron in our work for social justice.

There was something else that came out of Selma. Prior to Selma, most Unitarian Universalists saw themselves as being part of a faith that stood boldly for freedom and justice, diversity and inclusion. Unitarian Universalism was for everyone and the doors of our congregations were open to all. The fact that so many UUs were white and privileged was often attributed to everything under the sun except the fact that we were, in reality, not as welcoming and inclusive as we thought.

After Selma, this perspective began to change. Having experienced what it is like to be in relationships of trust and love with people of color, those UUs who returned from Selma questioned just how welcoming and just how inclusive our congregations were. As Mark Morrison-Reed says so well, rather than being truly open to difference and diversity, Unitarian Universalism was actually about assimilation – the assimilation of different backgrounds and experiences into the largely white, Euro-American assumptions that dominated our faith and our congregations. While on the surface we welcomed “them” into our congregations, the expectation was always that they would be or become like us. And it was this unspoken culture of assimilation that explained, in Morrison-Reed’s view, the glaring lack of African American faces and voices in Unitarian Universalism.

I wish I could stand here today and tell you that since Selma, significant progress has been made in making Unitarian Universalism more welcoming and more inclusive to people of color. But that is simply not the case. Of course, some of the most blatant mistakes we were making at the time of Selma have been corrected. Our current hymnals, for example, contain words and music from African American voices, voices which were noticeably missing from our worship and religious education fifty years ago.

But as those of you who attend this or most any other Unitarian Universalist congregations know, our denomination remains mostly white and privileged. The reasons are undoubtedly varied and rooted in the assumptions and biases we are making about ourselves and those who are not coming through our doors.

But one thing I think Selma and its legacy have done is to enable us to acknowledge that our doors are not fully open and that our congregations are not fully welcoming. This acknowledgement has led Unitarian Universalists, over time, to begin examining their assumptions about how welcoming and open are doors truly are. In fact, I'm happy to report that our congregation is making a new effort to examine our assumptions so that we can become more inclusive and at next Sunday's service we will share with you what we are doing and what steps we will be taking in the future. I hope you can join us for this important service.

There is so much more I could say about Selma, about its legacy for Unitarian Universalism and for our nation, and about Mark Morrison-Reed's wonderful book. As I said before, I hope you will read his book. It will change your perspective on our past, our present, and our future. Let me simply conclude by saying that Selma was truly a turning point for our faith tradition. Prior to Selma there existed a wide gap between our values and our actions – a gap that Selma closed, at least for a time. Selma also taught us that acting for justice requires courage, sacrifice, humility, and a willingness to stand in solidarity with the oppressed and disinherited. Finally, Selma taught us that we are only at the beginning of a journey to become a truly welcoming and inclusive faith – a faith that not only changes lives but that is also willing to be changed by those whose voices have been marginalized and underrepresented in our congregations.

I want to leave you with some words on the legacy of Selma from the conclusion of Mark Morrison-Reed's book. He writes:

"It is not possible, nor necessary, to know the outcome of our actions; therefore we act in faith. Faith asks not that we succeed, but that we try. We try because we yearn to live out our values. Conscience urges us on, for we have dreamed of a better, more just tomorrow. We care therefore we act. In acting we risk having our hearts broken a thousand times; therefore, we are sustained by hope. That is the price those who cleared the way for us accepted. It is what living fully, deeply, and with integrity demands." (*The Selma Awakening* 221)