

**From Selma to Bismarck: Reflections on the Birthday Anniversary of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968)**

The morning of April 5, 1968, I was in the lobby at O'Hare airport waiting to catch the next flight for an open seat for student stand-by to Nashville, Tennessee when the news of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination virtually shut the airport down. Newscasters and politicians from all over the country were connecting through Chicago, snatching up seats on every available flight South to Memphis. The night before, Rev. King had died from a single gunshot to the head as he stood on the balcony of his hotel only one day after his prescient "I've Been to the Mountaintop" address. Rev. King was 39 years old.

I was half his age then, 19 and a student at the University of North Dakota, traveling to Nashville, Tennessee as a delegate from the Student Senate to a student power conference, whose keynote speaker was civil rights activist Julian Bond, a founder of the SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Council. One of the key topics of the student power conference was how college students might advance voter registration, the cause which had led SNCC to form a coalition just a few years earlier with the SCLC, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, co-founded by Rev. King.

When I finally arrived at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, much later that day, plans already were underway for a peaceful march to commemorate the life of Rev. King and to call for renewed efforts to pass voting rights legislation that would eliminate once and for all the old "Jim Crow" restrictions that prevented blacks in so many Southern states from full participation in the practice of democracy. The following afternoon, I marched through the streets of Nashville along with several hundred students and faculty from Vanderbilt, Fisk and other local colleges.

It was a life changing experience to march in solidarity with so many young African Americans in a place and at a time that resonated with the potency of shaping history. We marched with linked arms, singing. "The Times They are A'Changing," and "We Shall Overcome." We were maced and sprayed with tear gas and some in the front

were clubbed and arrested. The experience is seared in memory and foundational to my life-long support to advance civil rights and equal opportunity for all.

Since I'd never heard of Unitarian Universalism at 19, I didn't know about the deep connection between Unitarians and Universalists and the civil rights movement. I didn't know about our longstanding relationship with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. himself.

The Unitarian Universalist Association was not quite four years old when Rev. King sent an urgent telegram to our Boston headquarters on March 7, 1965, asking religious leaders and concerned citizens to join him in Selma, Alabama, where African Americans marching for their right to vote had been brutally attacked by the local police. The first martyr of the Selma campaign was 26-year-old African American civil rights activist Jimmy Lee Jackson. It was his death that launched the march to Montgomery.

About 500 Unitarian Universalists, including nearly one-fifth of all Unitarian Universalist ministers, plus laypeople, went to Selma and Montgomery to participate in the civil rights campaign. One of the UU ministers was the Rev. James J. Reeb, a 38 year old associate minister at All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, DC. Another was Viola Gregg Luizzo, a 40 year old civil rights activist from Michigan and mother of five. Both Jim Reeb and Viola Liuzzo paid for their commitment to the cause of civil rights with their lives and their murders helped change the course of history.

Jim Reeb had been in Selma less than a day when white assailants attacked him and two other white UU ministers on a sidewalk. The blow to his head was fatal. Viola Liuzzo was shot as she drove a relief car back toward Montgomery to pick up weary marchers. But it was Reeb's death on March 11, 1965 that inspired a wave of nationwide protests, memorial services, and calls for federal action. It transformed Reeb into a martyr and created a political groundswell that President Lyndon Johnson needed to introduce new voting rights legislation.

Four days after Reeb's death, Johnson invoked his memory, calling him "that good man," when he introduced the Voting Rights Act to a joint session of Congress. Many African Americans noted bitterly at the time that Jackson's death did not generate a sympathy call from the president of the United States, but that it took Jim Reeb's death, the murder of a white man, to get national attention. Further, the president himself announced the arrest of four Ku Klux Klansmen charged with shooting Viola Liuzzo, but no one was ever arrested for the gunshot that killed Jackson.

President Johnson had invited Rev. King to attend the historic speech, but King turned him down. Instead, Rev. King stayed in Selma to deliver James Reeb's eulogy the same day. An account of Rev. King's eulogy for James Reeb was adapted from a journal kept by the UU minister Rev. Richard D. Leonard during his 18 days in the Selma and Montgomery civil rights campaign of 1965. Excerpts were published in the May/June 2001 edition of the *UU World*. Here is a selection from that article:

"When King began to speak, however, it suddenly seemed right that we should all be there. Everyone moved a bit in his or her seat when King asked rhetorically, 'Who killed Jim Reeb?' He answered: A few ignorant men. He then asked, 'What killed Jim Reeb?' and answered: 'An irrelevant church, an indifferent clergy, an irresponsible political system, a corrupt law enforcement hierarchy, a timid federal government, and an uncommitted Negro population.'

"He exhorted us to leave the ivory towers of learning and storm the bastions of segregation and see to it that the work Jim Reeb had started be continued so that the white South might come to terms with its conscience.

"We rose to sing 'We Shall Overcome' yet one more time, and close to a thousand voices united in a mighty chorus. The verse 'Black and white together' took on a deeper meaning for us as we thought of Jimmy Lee Jackson and James Reeb united in the democracy of death. As we hummed a final chorus, the Hebrew prayer for the dead was intoned and then translated for us, with its phrase, 'Peace for all with justice.'"

40 years after the death of Rev. King, we have elected our first president with an African father and a white mother from Kansas. There has been progress. Some of the

most egregious forms of racism have been legislated out of existence and an entire generation is growing up knowing about segregation only as an event learned in history classes. The 19 year old college student today has a very different understanding of race relations than I did as a student activist. Many of these teens are approaching adulthood with lived experiences that are multi-racial and multi-ethnic.

In our larger urban areas, even in small urban cities like Minneapolis and Saint Paul, students may speak dozens of first languages other than English. Students from communities of color may be the majority and caucasians a minority. Discussions of race may not center on issues relating to Native Americans or African Americans but rather on new immigrant population groups, including latinos and asians as well as multiple nationalities from Africa, largely Somalis, Ethiopian and Kenyan. Anti-Semitism has taken a back burner to concerns about Islam and the differences between Islam as a religious tradition and political or “radical” Islam. The times still may be a'changing but perhaps not everywhere at the same rate.

Our UU Association of Congregations continues to support anti-racism activities in our churches. Efforts are aimed both at opening pathways to leadership for people of color and to supporting awareness of the relationship between skin color – of whiteness – and economic, and political power in our society. In 2001, Rev. Bill Sinkford became the first African American to head the UUA and last year Rev. Peter Morales, an hispanic, was elected Sinkford's successor. Seminary enrollment of African Americans and other people of color is up and more congregations are calling ministers of color to work with local churches. Many churches have engaged in self-study about their relationship to the larger populations in their communities and the current impact of historical racism and prejudice.

We're making progress. There is hope. But we all know that while the arc of history may point toward justice, the job of bring racial equality into being is not finished. Where do we go from here?

Our UU faith asks us to examine this question as a matter of conscience and of action ... to engage in conversations about tough questions like this and to do what we can, whenever and wherever we can, to bring justice and peace into the world.

So, I invite you today to share your insights, your experience of racial justice-making over your lifetime? How do you measure progress? What vision for justice making do you hold for your children or the next generation?

“What moves you?” UUA president Peter Morales asked recently. He then suggested that “We only find ourselves when we lose ourselves in service to something that transcends us.”

What challenges face our Bismarck-Mandan communities of color today, especially native Americans? Are there ways, even small ways, in which we might become allies in service to something that transcends us? Since we are a small congregation with most people wearing many hats and already socially active in our jobs or vocations, are there ways to share information among ourselves about what we're already doing and claim those as ways we live out our UU values and principles?”

## DISCUSSION

Perhaps this morning’s conversation will become the start of a continuing and larger conversation in the days and weeks to come. Perhaps it will even lead to new questions.

I leave you with the words of author Ralph Ellison said, through his fictional character Rev. Hickman in the story, *Juneteenth*,

“We know who we are by the way we walk. We know who we are by the way we talk. We know who we are by the way we sing. We know who we are by the way we

dance. We know who we are by the way we praise ...”

Let us walk and talk and sing and dance and praise, together as one strong body,  
the message of love and peace for all. Blessed be and amen.

Rev. Lyn Burton

January 17, 2010