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Arlington Street Church
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Call to Selma, 2015

The Selma, Alabama of 1965 “epitomized the scandal of black disfranchisement. Of the fifteen thousand black people of voting age in the county, three hundred and thirty five had managed to register to vote. White people, who numbered less than half the population, made up ninety-nine percent of the electorate.

The idea of basing the voting rights movement in Selma appealed to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference, both because, against all odds, the local black leadership was strong, and because the sheriff, Jim Clark, was particularly brutal; he could be counted on to bully, abuse, and jail black people with impunity. That’s not as strange as it sounds; they believed that, if they could precipitate a confrontation, the news reports would seize the nation’s attention. “Let Clark show his true colors,” said Dr. King. “In a crisis, we must have a sense of drama.” “With any luck, we would be visibly abused without being maimed or killed,” recalled Rev. Ralph Abernathy, a Southern Christian Leadership Conference leader. “The line we walked was increasingly thin in these matters.”¹

They were right. But the price was very, very high.

On February 18th, 1965, three members of the Jackson family – twenty-six year old Vietnam War veteran and Baptist deacon, Jimmie Lee; his mother, Viola; and his grandfather, Cager Lee – took part in a night march for voting rights, and were attacked by Sheriff Clark’s goons. Viola and Cager Lee were beaten with billy clubs; when Jimmie Lee intervened, he was shot and died a lingering death.

¹ Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000*, p. 290

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference proposed a fifty-four mile march, from Selma to Montgomery, to place responsibility for Jimmie Lee Jackson's death at Governor Wallace's door. On Sunday, March 7th, 1965, about six hundred people, walking two abreast, set out. After crossing the Edmund Pettus bridge, they were clubbed, whipped, and tear gassed. *Time* magazine described it as "an orgy of police brutality." Again, by design, what became known as Bloody Sunday unfolded in the media. The whole world was watching. One aide to President Johnson wrote, "What the public felt was the deepest sense of outrage it has ever felt on the civil rights question."

On March 8th, Dr. King sent a telegram to the clergy of America, which read, in part, "In the vicious maltreatment of defenseless citizens of Selma, we have witnessed an eruption of the disease of racism, which seeks to destroy all America. No American is without responsibility. The people of Selma will struggle on for the soul of the nation, but it is fitting that all Americans help to bear the burden. I call, therefore, on clergy of all faiths to join me in Selma."

Of the five hundred ministers who answered the call, more than one hundred were Unitarian Universalists. They were joined by an additional four hundred of our lay people.

Thirteen years ago, George Whitehouse and I joined some four hundred and fifty of our colleagues in Alabama for a week of remembrance and recommitment. By then, those who had been in Selma as young men were grandfathers. One of them, our colleague Ray Manker, remembered working to serve dinner to the clergy who had gathered at Brown Chapel. The telephone rang in the church kitchen; an old woman picked it up. She listened for a moment and said, in an exasperated voice, "Well, you'll have to get in line!" and slammed down the receiver. "What was that all about?" Ray Manker asked her. She brushed it off angrily. "O, just another bomb threat!"

On March 9th, 1965, Dr. King led a symbolic march of the clergy to the Edmund Pettus bridge. That night, Arlington Street's Jim Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister and a friend of Mary Ann and Dan Hardenbergh, left a restaurant with two colleagues, my friends Clark Olsen and Orloff Miller. They were attacked by a carload of white men; Jim was hit in the head with a metal pipe or a baseball bat, and later died.

On March 11th, the board of the Unitarian Universalist Association, along with my minister and mentor, Unitarian Universalist Association president Dana McLean Greeley, adjourned its meeting in Boston and flew to Selma. On the 15th, Dr. Greeley memorialized Jim Reeb there; Dr. King gave the eulogy.

Thirty-seven years later, my colleague and friend Dick Leonard recalled that service. “Everyone moved a bit in [their] seat when [Dr.] 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, [and] a timid federal government....”

“He exhorted us,” Dick says, “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....”²

It was Jim Reeb’s death – not without irony, the death of a white northerner – that finally sent the nation over its tipping point. That evening, at long last, in a forty-five minute speech to Congress, President Johnson proposed the enactment of a Voting Rights Bill, praising those African Americans whose “actions and protests ... have awakened the conscience of this nation,” and urging the nation to overcome “the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.”³

On March 21st, more than three thousand people marched out of Selma, bound for Montgomery. Arthur Jellis, the minister of my early childhood, was in that number. At our clergy gathering in 2002, he recalled, “I was in the tenth or so rank. A graying, small lady was on my left. To be in that procession was frightening and unnerving. I did neither weep nor tremble, or so I thought. But my marching partner knew it was bad going for me. She reached over the short distance between us, took my hand, and said, ‘We’re going to be all right.’”

Four days later, over twenty-five thousand people joined the marchers as they entered the capitol city to present a petition to Governor George Wallace, demanding the vote for all citizens of Alabama. Addressing the

² Rev. Richard D. Leonard, *Call to Selma* (Skinner House Books, 2003).

³ Fairclough, *op cit*, p. 292

crowd, Dr. King said, “We are on the move now, and no wave of racism can stop us.” At the end of the march, marchers signed each other’s orange jackets. Dick Leonard asked a teenager who had marched with him for his signature. The boy didn’t know how to write his name, but he said, “I can write *freedom!*” And so he did. Thirty-seven years later, Dick Leonard showed us that jacket, and that electrifying signature. *Freedom!*

But standing at the airport on March 26th, he saw an ambulance speed past. Viola Gregg Liuzzo, a Unitarian Universalist laywoman and mother of five, had been watching the eleven o’clock news in Detroit when the first terrible images from Bloody Sunday began to roll into her living room. Moved to help, she drove to Alabama to drive a shuttle for marchers. On a lonely stretch of road between Montgomery and Selma, Viola was shot to death by the Ku Klux Klan.

Jimmie Lee Jackson, Jim Reeb, and Viola Gregg Liuzzo – the three martyrs of Selma – did not die in vain. Five months later, the Voting Rights Act became law. Extending from Alabama to Louisiana, Mississippi, Georgia, the Carolinas, and Virginia, this crowning achievement of the Civil Rights movement enfranchised black Southerners, democratized the South, and officially ended the era of Jim Crow.⁴

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Fifty years later, how does the call to Selma call to us today?

On August 9th in Ferguson, Missouri, Mike Brown, an 18-year-old black man, was fatally shot by a white police officer. Ashley Yates, a young activist tweeting as Brown Blaze, writes, “Ferguson resonated with so many people because Ferguson really is everywhere. The economic assault via government schemes, police brutality, and culpable leadership are dynamics that play out across the globe....”

“It’s been a long [seven] months, and... Ferguson is still here.... During what many are regarding as a historical time, it’s imperative that we be intentional about our future.... It’s time to stop thanking Ferguson with words and start nourishing the movement that blossomed from the sacrifices of community members.... [W]e must conjure up the fighting spirit displayed on West Florissant....”

⁴ Adam Fairclough, *op cit*, p. 293

Ashley Yates concludes, “We’ll know #Black Lives Matter when the sites of our tragedies become true places of triumph.”⁵

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From Selma to Ferguson, what is our part in turning tragedy to triumph?

Across the generations, Dr. King speaks to us today. In *Drum Major Instinct*, the sermon he preached in February of 1968, two months before his assassination,⁶ he told the congregation at Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church what he would like said about him at his funeral. Tucked into that sermon is Dr. King’s invitation to serve.

“...[E]verybody can be great,” he said, “because everybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You don’t have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don’t have to know Einstein’s theory of relativity to serve. You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.”⁷

From Selma to Ferguson, we are called to serve with a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love. We are called to pay attention, and to find our place – claim a place, make a place – on that arc of the moral universe that bends toward justice.

Beloved spiritual companions,

Let us reach over the short distance between us
and join hands.

Together, let us take up the work begun in Selma by

⁵ Ashley Yates, *Black Lives Will Matter When Our Tragedies Turn to Triumph: Let Ferguson Be a Start*. Please see huffingtonpost.com/ashley-yates/black-lives-will-matter-w_b_6787266.html

⁶ April 4, 1968

⁷ Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Drum Major Instinct*, February 4, 1968. This was an adaptation of *Drum-Major Instincts*, the homily given in 1952 by Rev. J. Wallace Hamilton, a well-known liberal white Methodist. Excerpts of Dr. King’s sermon were played at his nationally televised funeral service, held at Atlanta’s Ebenezer Baptist Church on April 9th, 1968. Please see mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_the_drum_major_instinct/ and mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_drum_major_instinct_1968/

Jimmie Lee Jackson, Jim Reeb, and Viola Gregg Liuzzo,
and continuing in Ferguson and beyond.

Together, with a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love,
may we hear and heed
the call to serve
and bend the arc toward justice.