

## Where Do We Go From Here: A Civil Rights Pilgrimage®

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“Now, we got to get this thing right. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. “

Excerpted from: Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, *Where do we go from here: Chaos or Community?* 1967.

In 2013, we were a bus full of Unitarian Universalists and friends, led on this *Living Legacy Pilgrimage* by compassionate colleagues and friends, Black and White. We were on a bus trip through Alabama and Mississippi to meet the people who made history in the civil rights movement. I was a bit worried if I would be shamed, but we were all treated with the greatest compassion, respect and appreciation.

We started in Birmingham, Alabama. We went onto Marion, Selma, over the Edmund Pettus bridge and on to Montgomery. We visited museums, monuments and cemeteries, honoring civil rights patriots and martyrs known and unknown. We met veterans of the movement.

A *pilgrimage* is an outer journey *and* an inner journey. This journey put us in the path with those earlier pioneers, survivors and veterans. By following their footsteps, hearing real people tell their stories, their terror and triumph, their fears and fortitude, their doubts and faith, and their ongoing struggles to hold onto the progress they made happen; how things are better, but much still needs to be done. You see how they appreciate what it cost them, how much they want to pass on that legacy of love and justice , persistence and courage, kindness and song.

Because you have shared moments of connection and grace, because they have allowed you to see them in their full humanity, you feel how it feels to need to be free, to be a somebody. You are transformed by a change in your own heart. You take up the song. You want to keep telling the story.

I have come to see that *Slavery* is America's original sin. And its evil is its legacy that is still infecting the heart of this democracy. The history of the Civil Rights era is important to all of us.

Like the theology of original sin, it keeps getting passed down: White supremacy, bigotry, our 13<sup>th</sup> amendment, segregation, Jim Crow, terror lynchings, and, though more "mannered up" these days, code words like "states rights." Mass incarceration and the killing of Black children, women and men are all too common and perpetrated by those delegated to uphold the law.

On our pilgrimage, we started in Birmingham and learned about the evils of segregation and Jim Crow.

Dr. King thought about evil. Analyzed its forms and the violence that keep it in place.

"Evil needs violence to enforce it," Dr King said. There are laws and intimidation when evil is secure, and anonymous; threats and violence when it is threatened, weakened and vulnerable.

Look at recent events, the rising of the remnants of White Supremacy ideology, unashamed, in daylight, in seats of power. Did it ever go away?

Dr. King wrote how non-violent direct action, *Civil Disobedience*, reveals evil and forces it into sunlight. One result is that subtle violence becomes overt: comes out into the open where we can see it and name it.

I have failed to appreciate the stresses that segregation and racism creates in a life and infects the spirit of life: the effort it takes to affirm your worth and dignity in the face of such injustice at lunch counters, and buses, schools, churches, hospitals, and even cemeteries.

The first Jim Crow law was passed in Alabama in 1865. There grew to be hundreds of these laws just in Alabama where they were part of every detail of everyday life. Jim Crow was evil in its ordinariness. And it was brutally enforced. Between 1877 and 1950 there were 3,959 racial terror lynchings.

Birmingham, Alabama was founded in 1871. It was an industrial city, the Pittsburgh of the south. It was also built as a segregated city.

Among Jim Crow Laws was the banning mass meetings in public places. So if you were Black the only places left were the churches.

Shopping? If you were Black, you were allowed through a side door of the department store but if you tried on a pair of shoes, or a dress, you bought them.

Walking downtown? If you were heading down a sidewalk and a White man or woman was coming in other direction, you had to step into the street. Don't look in the eye of a White woman: that was eyeball rape.

Our first pilgrimage stop was attending worship at the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church, opposite Kelly Ingram Park.

Fifty years before, in April and May 1963, Black residents organized a boycott of stores. It hurt the merchants. Folks would march two by two to protest. They were arrested. The boycott of stores grew and school children by the hundreds walked two by two and were taken to jail. Then there were too many for the jails, and they were held in outdoor pens. But then there were just too many...

Civil disobedience exposed the evil of segregation: the fire hoses or dogs tearing at dignified men and women and children. TV exposed the violence toward children in marches during the 1960's with hoses and dogs shaming White America. Blacks won an agreement to gradually desegregate downtown over 60 days.

Dr. King noted, "A time of success is the most dangerous time."

After the warm and welcoming service with lots of singing, our pilgrimage went down to the basement area. There is a clock in the 16<sup>th</sup> St. church stopped at 10:22 because on Sunday, September 15, 1963, four members of the Ku Klux Klan planted 15 sticks of dynamite attached to a timing device beneath the church and it blew up killing 4 little girls who were getting ready in their white dresses in the bathroom: Addie Mae Collins, Carol Denise

McNair, Carole Rosamond Robertson, Cynthia Dianne Wesley. Two boys were shot.

The church basement marks the location of the bomb. At a church gift counter there are cups and post cards for sale. I asked the woman there, "Did your family participate?" She nodded. She said she was in college at the time and went on the marches. "It is better," she added, "You can legislate – and it is better, but there is lots more to do. It takes time to change the human heart."

Other churches were also bombed in the South and threats were so routine that at Unitarian Universalist Church of Birmingham, the secretary got a call, a bomb threat, and replied, "Come ahead, but you'll have to take your turn. There are several others ahead of you."

Birmingham is a better place by 2013, a better place. The park is now filled with replicas of that time: special water cannon guns that concentrated the hose power, bars for the jails, statues, and reflecting pools.

In 1964 the Federal Civil Rights Law was passed.

Dr. King said, "When the people confront a great injustice, the response needs to be an act of great dignity." That act was the Great March in 1965 from Selma to Montgomery, the Alabama State Capital. It began in Marion, Alabama.

On February 18, 1965 *the great injustice* that sparked the march happened in Marion. Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young black man was trying to protect his grandmother during a melee after a protest. He was shot in the stomach at point blank range: 5 times. Marchers wanted to take his body to the Montgomery state house steps: the *great act of dignity*, but it was against a state court order.

On March 7, a march started from Selma over the Edmund Pettus bridge. That day became known as *Bloody Sunday*.

We heard one veteran of the first march tell how when she was 8, longing to go into a soda shop and have an ice cream cone, her grandmother said to her, "You'll be able to sit with that White girl and eat that ice cream cone when you can vote." At that time only 6% of Blacks citizen in Alabama were registered to vote.

When she was eleven years old, on Bloody Sunday, she was marching to the Edmund Pettus Bridge with her grandmother.

“They didn’t just run us down with clubs and tear gas. They used horses. They did not stop when we had gone back from the bridge. They chased us all the way back to the church.”

By age thirteen, she had been arrested 9 times.

Two days later on March 9<sup>th</sup>, they tried again to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma; beginning at the Church to cross over the bridge to other side. A battalion of police with batons, horses and tear gas stood across the highway.

The Civil Rights Movement had relied on federal court orders, and a federal court had denied a permit for the march. Martin Luther King did not want to disobey a federal court order, so they turned back: a thousand people.

It had been peaceful, the turning back, but James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist minister was with others leaving a restaurant in Selma when he was hit on the head with a bat. He died a few hours later.

President Johnson went on television as the nation recoiled at the violence. It took the death of a White minister to move the president.

Between March the 9<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>, a federal lawsuit made its way to court and a ruling allowed the march.

On March 21, three thousand people (over 200 UU’s) began the march again in Selma protected by the nationalized state National Guard. Federal troops kept a perimeter, searching fields for bombs. Twenty-five thousand people showed up on the last day, March 25. Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King was not allowed to stand on the steps of the state house in Montgomery to address the crowd; but he did address the crowd.

After the end of the event, on March 25, volunteers gave rides to civil rights workers to get back from Montgomery to Selma and Marion. Viola Liuzzo did that for an African American young man. That night, on Highway 80, a car of

KKK members ran her car off the road and shot her in the face. The young man pretended to be dead and survived.

Five months later, on August 6<sup>th</sup>, the Voting Rights Act passed. The U.S. Justice Department said it was the most successful federal legislation ever passed. Voting percentages of Black citizens registered to vote went from 6% to 80%. Imagine if there were no black voters in this past special election.

Civil Rights Songs are our modern Psalms. The *Living Legacy Pilgrimage* involved lots of studying and sharing and singing. Before Crossing the Bridge we sang this song-

*This love that I have – the world didn't give it to me  
This love that I have - the world didn't give it to me  
The world didn't give it - and the world can't take it away.*

Continuing our pilgrimage, we head to Montgomery, Alabama where we learned about how Rosa Parks was removed from a Montgomery bus on December 1, 1955 because she refused to give up her seat to a White woman.

A teacher, Mrs. Robinson, with a student volunteer mimeographed 50,000 leaflets that read, "Don't ride the buses on Monday." Beginning on December 5, 1955, ninety percent (90 %) of the African Americans in Montgomery, and some of their supporters, did not ride the buses. The Montgomery Bus Boycott began. Folks walked and created ride share programs.

Soon after, in January 1956, Dr. King got threatening phone calls. And few days later his home was bombed. A White Methodist minister, Rev. Graetz, also had his home bombed back then.

Still they persisted.

The bus boycott lasted for over 1 year. Finally, on December 21, 1956 the U.S. Supreme Court desegregated Montgomery buses.

In Montgomery, we visited Dr. King's first parsonage, and then the Southern Poverty Law Center. The SPLC faces the State House and on its property is the

civil rights memorial (Created by Vietnam Veterans Memorial designer Maya Lin). The SPLC website reads:

A circular black granite table records the names of the martyrs and chronicles the history of the movement in lines that radiate like the hands of a clock. Water emerges from the table's center and flows evenly across the top. On a curved black granite wall behind the table is engraved Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s well-known paraphrase of Amos 5:24 - *We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.*

The Civil Rights Memorial invites visitors to touch the engraved names and "is a contemplative area. Designer Maya Lin says:

...a place to remember the Civil Rights Movement, to honor those killed during the struggle, to appreciate how far the country has come in its quest for equality, and to consider how far it has to go.

## CLOSING

If we actually believe that there is a network of mutuality. Then the history of injustice, the history of slavery, reconstruction, segregation, Jim Crow, mass incarceration is our history.

If we sing we want to give life “ the shape of justice” then we are called— required-- in varying degrees to participate and persist to:

Stand up for justice,  
Stand up for truth.  
Stand up for peace.  
Stand up for love.  
When we do, the spirit of that great Love  
will stand with us forever.

When we read or recite these words, think about the Civil Rights Movement:  
We hold these truths to be self evident – that all people are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights. That among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness – that to secure these right governments are

instituted among them deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

May it be so .

#### References

King, M.L., Jr. (1967). *Where do we go from here: Chaos or Community?* New York. Harper & Row.

King, M.L, Jr. (1959). *Stride Toward Freedom*. Place of publication not identified: Gollancz.