

"The Living Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr."
Rev. Nancy O. Arnold

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UU Congregation of Danbury

I was a child when I saw the news footage of the riots and violence against those working for civil rights. The images of children and adults being brutalized – beaten and hosed – by Bull Connor and his police force – the bombings of churches, and the total disregard for human life – simply because of skin color – affected me deeply. The injustice was unmistakable. Many of my life choices grew out of this early experience.

In 2012 I participated in a week-long Civil Rights Living Legacy Pilgrimage. The Pilgrimage was led by a mix of Unitarian Universalist ministers and lay leaders, some of whom had been part of the Civil Rights Movement. From Birmingham to Memphis we met with civil rights activists who have carried forward the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other heroes of the movement. That experience inspired the theme for today's service. I knew that there must be people in this congregation with their own stories to tell.

Marie and Sam have already told you a little bit about how they have fostered the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. As for many of us, the experience was formative for them.

Jane Leff remembers sitting on the floor of her parents' apartment in Forest Hills, Queens in 1961, and listening to John Kennedy speak. From the beginning of his campaign she had been impressed by him and his vision. When he took office on that cold January day, his phrase "Ask not what your country can do for you....ask what you can do for your country" woke her up to what politics has to do with us, and with her in particular. She was 16, a senior in HS, and finally began to pay attention.

In 1963, Jane spent the summer in San Francisco with her best High School friend, working and feeling very much an adult. They decided that before they returned home, they had to make an important stop in Washington, DC.

For both Alice and Jane, it was the first time they attended a civil rights demonstration. Their families were not thrilled about the plan; but on that very hot August day they joined what felt like a million others walking together toward the Lincoln Memorial. They were both comfortable in the huge crowd, and trusted completely that they would be safe.

When they got as close as possible, they stood to listen, to sing, and to cry as they heard speaker after speaker call for a different kind of America. She describes Martin Luther King's speech as brilliant, moving, and unforgettable. But that day, unaware of what lay ahead, it was Joan Baez that filled Jane's heart with joy!

And then, just months later, President Kennedy was assassinated, and with everyone else Jane watched, and cried, and cried some more.

There are deep ties between Unitarian Universalism and the Civil Rights Movement. On March 7, 1965, as 600 people began a march to Selma, they were attacked and driven back with billy clubs, hoses, and tear gas wielded by state and local law enforcement on what came to be known as "Bloody Sunday." The next day, Martin Luther King, Jr. sent a telegram to Dana McLean Greeley, then President of the Unitarian Universalist Association. The telegram read:

In the vicious maltreatment of defenseless citizens of Selma, where old women and young children were gassed and clubbed at random, we have witnessed an eruption of the disease of racism which seeks to destroy all of America. No American is without responsibility. All are involved in the sorrow that rises from Selma to contaminate every crevice of our national life. The people of Selma will struggle on for the soul of the nation, but it is fitting that all America help to bear the burden. I call therefore, on clergy of all faiths, representative of every part of the country, to join me for a ministers' march to Montgomery on Tuesday morning, March 9th. In this way all America will testify to the fact that the struggle in Selma is for the survival of democracy everywhere in our land. (from the personal papers of Orloff Miller, cited by Mark Morrison-Reed in *The Selma Awakening*, p. ix)

A number of UU clergy responded to the call. Among them was James Reeb, who was attacked by white demonstrators. When he died from his injuries two days later, the UUA Board of Trustees "adjourned its Boston meeting and traveled to Selma to join the march" (Richard D. Leonard, *Call to Selma*, p. viii)

Martin Luther King, Jr. preached at Reeb's memorial service before being joined by more than three thousand marchers in Selma. More than 200 of the estimated 500 white clergy were Unitarian Universalists. The Unitarian Universalist church was often the only one in many southern communities willing to harbor freedom riders and stand alongside the activists.

So it is no surprise that Unitarian Universalist youth became involved in the movement as well.

In 1963, the UU Service Committee organized youth to work with children in Norfolk, Virginia. They spent a few weeks helping young black children read as part of a Head Start program.

Several of the children became particularly attached to the youth leaders. One of the leaders recalls the little girl who climbed into her

lap and stroked her long hair. She looked at her with big brown soulful eyes and said 'I wish I was white like you.'"

As the youth leader later reflected, "I have always loved reading and taken my education for granted. I didn't know that anyone would envy me my skin color."

(Diana Lindley, UUCSF, 1/18/15)

The trip was not without incident. The group of five girls and five boys traveled by van with a male leader. At one point they were stopped by an officer and given a ticket for "speeding" when they were going less than 30 miles an hour. The officer also accused the leader of running a brothel! The girls were shocked. The one who told me this story, had yet to go on her first date. (story from Diana Lindley, UUCSF, 1/18/15)]

As Sam McCoy told us, teaching is one way to foster the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement.

In 1968, Lynn Taborsak went to teach in Washington, D.C. right after graduation from college. She was part of Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" with a HEW (Health, Education & Welfare) fellowship as a member of the Urban Teacher Corps. Lynn learned to teach in a basement classroom at Spingarn Senior High School, 24 th and Benning Road N.E., Washington's premiere basketball school. It was just 4 years after passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Lynn remembers rolling up the windows in her car to drive through tear gas on the streets of the nation's capitol.

It didn't take her long to learn to teach. There was no team leader. There were no resource centers, no curriculum specialists, no fraternity among teachers, not even shop talk. There was no material especially developed for inner-city, culturally disadvantaged students. So Lynn developed a simple, flexible plan to teach the whole significance of American civilization to fifty-five kids.

Her plan was to begin at the beginning and go as far as possible. But the beginning was hard to find. Lynn swore that each foolproof assignment would get the students launched into the appropriate pattern for the study of American History. So she began with a political map of the world.

Her plan changed when she realized how many of her kids couldn't identify the continent of North America on a map of the world. In one day she learned a valuable lesson. Her kids weren't juvenile delinquents. They were just innocent of all the knowledge passed down through centuries of time to 1968. There was her beginning -- and it had no end.

For the first three weeks of school, there were no books. Things got steadily worse. One third of the students were on the delinquent book list which meant that no teacher could issue them a text book without clearance from the book clerk. That usually involved fantastic amounts of money for fines. It also created a huge black market in stolen books. Another third of her students couldn't be coerced into bringing their books to class. This group of regulars would ask to go to their lockers, one at a time, with the

room pass. A third of the kids did bring their books and desks were rearranged so those students without books could look on, cheek by jowl, with a kindred spirit. This faithfully brought about a flowering of the American History social hour.

Perhaps the single greatest factor behind Lynn's success in the inner-city classroom was a black man named Acklyn Lynch. It was something he said about teaching. He said that in the classroom you have to legitimize your role as a teacher, to teach with your own authority. He was demanding a moral purity from teachers that was seldom found in saints or prophets. Lynn cannot explain why his position appealed to her so powerfully. She can only say that because of it, she taught without stint or limit.

Though the Civil Rights Movement was focused in the south, its impact was felt all over the country – sometimes in surprising ways.

As a green card holder in 1963, Elise Jaeger did not feel entitled to act and be part of the civil rights movement. She wanted to be in Washington for the march, but was limited, because at the time she had five youngsters. However she did participate in some local protests. One was to house-sit for a black couple who had purchased a house in a white neighborhood. The house-sitting was to dissuade vandalism, which was prevalent at that time by people who wanted to keep blacks out.

That life changing experience affected an entire generation, including Elise. She credits the civil rights movement with her becoming an American citizen.

The activism of the 1960s carried over into the choices many of us made afterwards.

Jane became very active in the Feminist Movement and still maintains her connections with friends from those Consciousness Raising days. Over the years, three of her friends joined UU congregations in various places as a way to meet liberal, feminist people. Jane loves our UU story and passes it on whenever possible. She continues to be involved in the community through UU Danbury, working at the Soup Kitchen and being part of the Morris Street School program started by Charlie Schott.

Lynn's life exemplifies the spirit of the civil rights movement in all that she does. A native of Danbury who attended Danbury public schools, Lynn likes to keep her hand in different activities that benefit the community. She served in the legislature for four terms, City Council for one, and ran for Mayor in 2011. Although unsuccessful in that mayoral bid, she has been described as "Mayor Boughton's worst nightmare." You'll see Lynn doing things around Danbury that benefit the children, immigrants, and those who need a helping hand. She works with the Association of Religious Communities doing outreach to the immigrant community, as well as working at the Soup Kitchen, the Community Garden, and Farmer's Market.

She was a public school teacher and is not above dressing up as a banana or a bunch of grapes at the Farmer's Market to teach children about the importance of eating healthy food. Her involvement with the League of Women's Voters for many years helped promote the idea that voters deserve a choice and not a single candidate running on a ballot. (8/25/2011 interview with Al Robinson)

Her message for today? She believes that despite the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which outlawed discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex and national origin, the lifework of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. must go on in our nation and in our community.

Martin Luther King said: "Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be." We know what he became.

Now I'm curious – did any of you besides Jane participate in the 1963 March on Washington? (Please stand, and keep standing.) How about the Selma to Montgomery marches over the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965? (Please stand, and keep standing.) How many of you contributed to the civil rights movement in other ways? (Please stand, and keep standing.) And how many of you – who may not even have been alive during the civil rights movement – how many of you have made a career of humanity, as Martin Luther King urged us to do? (please stand)

Look around you to see his living legacy. Martin showed the way. Inspired by his passion for justice, you followed. You – We – are the living legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. Thank you for accepting his challenge to work for peace and freedom.

May it ever be so.