**Marching in the Arc of Justice: Re-Visiting Selma Keynote Address**

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How many of you have seen the movie *Selma*?

You know something: You didn’t hear a word about the Second World War and I bet you didn’t expect to. You know something else: The film is an approximation of the truth. Hovering between fiction and reality, it isn’t what really happened, but it does capture its essence. That is fine because 50 years later we are mythologizing the events - spinning a Civil Rights saga. I don’t use the term myth pejoratively; myths are the narratives, the stories that make our self-understanding coherent and give voice to our values. This is inevitable and can be good or….

The film judiciously uses creative licences to point to what is true; the trouble is: that events context and complexity is stripped away. For a historian the movie is more of a snapshot because Selma does not make sense without reference to WW II.

My Uncle Lloyd enlisted. Trained in Utah, then sent to Camp Lee; Virginia, he ended up in Elgin Field, Florida. There segregation was enforced. “Colored” soldiers were barred from the movie theatre and the PX, but not German POWs. His unit, the 1898 Aviation Engineer Battalion, landed in southern Italy and began building airfields. Uncle Lloyd saw the Colored 366th Infantry Regiment (the first all-Negro regular army unit commanded only by Negro officers), the Nisei 442nd Regimental Combat Team (made up of second-generation Japanese Americans and praised as the most decorated in the army), and the Brazilian troops. These stood out because they were integrated.

The United Service Organizations (USO), which provided R and R for the troops, refused to serve Negroes. Uncle Lloyd and his buddies simply went to the British equivalent. Indeed, outside the USO, Lloyd didn’t encounter discrimination in Italy. He wrote home: “Over here it is good for a change. There is no obvious racial prejudice from the Italians. They could not afford it now, and there is none from the white troops around. That is a relief from the bigotry in the States, particularly where we come from.”

I listened to Uncle Lloyd’s stories and learned.  Yet there was much more I did not know, and even less that I understood.

I knew that during WW II the U.S. Army was segregated but did not understand that the 900,000 black GIs were usually consigned to serving as stevedores, laborers and cooks. I knew about Tuskegee Airmen and the Nisei 442nd but not about the half million Mexican American’s or the hundreds of thousands of braceros brought from Mexico to grow and harvest crops the U.S. needed.[[1]](#footnote-1) How selective our memory? How short-lived our gratitude? How perverse to demonize immigrants we still need and mean-spirited to shut the door of a nation *full of the descendants of immigrants* now that we are here. (However, we arrived.)   I also didn’t know about the twenty-five thousand Native American soldiers.

I knew that war led to African Americans getting jobs they had never held before because the war effort needed them. I knew that African-American scientists had worked on the A-bomb but did not know there were only about 20 of them or of the Hanford workers who helped to mine the Uranium.[[2]](#footnote-2) I didn’t know about the Committee on Fair Employment Practices much less understand that President Roosevelt’s hand was forced when, in 1942, A. Philip Randolph threatened to lead a march of 50,000 African Americans on Washington. The Nazi propaganda machine would have loved that.

I knew about the GI Bill but not that an inordinate number of African Americans soldiers received dishonorable (called blue) discharges (22% when they only made up 6.5% of the forces) and were not illegible for its benefits. I knew my Uncle Lloyd had used it to go to school, but I didn’t realize that a government-guaranteed housing loan was another of the benefits. Maybe that was because so few African Americans could access it because banks wouldn’t make loans for mortgages in African-American neighborhoods. Covenants, although by then illegal, and real estate practices also kept African Americans out of white neighborhoods and suburbs. Even when I did learn that I didn’t understand it implications.  First, it forced African Americans into purchasing homes on contract which were often predatory. Miss a payment and you could lose your home. Second, not getting a loan determined the kind of neighborhood you lived in and, therefore, the schools your children attended. If you want an explanation for the enduring income gap between black and white? Start there.

Racism that was (and is) built into a system that gave an additional boost to white Americans in their accrual of wealth and educational advantage. This was a benefit they took (and take) for granted. It fed the belief - a false one - that their prosperity was solely due to their industriousness, with its implicit negative assumption about the African-American work ethic.  Euro-Americans do not want to know this. Why? In correcting the American narrative; it dispels the bootstrap myth; it calls an inflated self-understanding into question; and, along with undermining their self-image, raises difficult moral questions. Where is the remorse? How does one atone? Should there be reparations? Knowing stirs up guilt and confusion. These are so uncomfortable it is better not to know.

WW II is rich with irony. African Americans in uniform and on factories floors were defending America’s democratized racism from racist fascism, and Black GIs returned home to face what they had been fighting abroad.

Serving in the 86th Railhead Company, Charles Patterson came ashore at Anzio. As they fought their way up the spine of Italy, his company was wiped out, and he sent home wounded with a Silver Star, a Bronze Star, and a Purple Heart. After recovering he was assigned to escort German POWs to a prison camp in Alabama. In Birmingham, the Germans ate in the white section of the bus station, but not the black soldiers guarding them. And when Sergeant Patterson leaned over and drank from a “whites only” water fountain, a white man slammed his head into the spout. Dazed and bleeding Patterson was surrounded by whites, who cursed and threatened him. He said he was lucky he wasn’t lynched; others didn’t escape that fate.

Why tell you these war stories? Not just because of the injustice they describe but because of the lessons they offer. One lesson is about unintended consequences. World War II made Selma possible. The war gave African Americans opportunities they would not otherwise have had. Their slogan was “Double V” – “victory at home and abroad.” They returned to discrimination but they returned with changed expectations and new confidence forged at a terrible price. That experience changed their self-perception and worldview, and these gave momentum to an emerging Civil Rights Movement.

They weren’t alone in being transformed by that war.  The experience of World War II also changed the worldview of many Euro-Americans. When the scales fell from their eyes, some were shocked by what they saw – oppression and brutality on their own doorstep.

This bore directly on what happened in Selma. On the afternoon of March 7, 1965, the protest march from Selma to Montgomery began and was savagely ended. That evening, ABC interrupted the broadcast of ***Judgment at Nuremberg***, a drama about the war crime trials in post-Nazi Germany. They cut to footage of the barbarous attack by Alabama State troopers and local vigilantes upon 600 black citizens of Selma. The connection couldn’t be missed. Ethel Gorman, president of the Unitarian Church of Birmingham, recalled that two days later, “Before we got down to business, we expressed our horror at the scenes in Selma which we had seen on TV. We felt shame for our state as well as pity for the victims; and fear because law enforcement officers acted like Nazi Storm Troopers.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

Carl Ulrich, a UU minister from Louisville, Kentucky wrote to his brother: “The tactic of the white power structure there, is to instill fear in the hearts of the Negro... and this has been the tactic for the last hundred years... and we in the rest of the country have just ignored it. But after it was so vividly shown to us ...when everyone saw it clearly on TV.... and with the temper of the country...it was almost impossible to ignore it. It is hard to believe, but the fact is that in Alabama there is a police state [and] the troopers are not there to protect the Negro.”

Three days after “Bloody Sunday”, as a minister from Long Island, stood at the Selma Wall facing a phalanx of police, he had to keep telling himself, because he could not believe it, “this is the U.S.A.”  One white Alabaman would later compared white Southerners to the “majority of Germans” who were “good Germans” during the Holocaust.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In March 1965, the 20th anniversary of the end of the Second World War was at hand. The trauma of the war years, having touched nearly every adult, was easily evoked. They remembered the sacrifices made and many were aware of the consequences of inaction in the face of tyranny.

In forcing people into new and unfamiliar situations the war disrupted the status quo. Whether it was women working in factories or men fighting, everyone endured change and suffered loss in defending their values and many were transformed. Nonetheless, most white American fancifully hoped that things would return to how it had been, but not African Americans. There was no going back. The protest of the brave black citizens of Selma only makes sense when it is understood as a consequence of the Second World War.

Today we assume that the outpouring of support and rush to Selma was because of the righteousness of the cause and magnitude of the injustice, but neither that nor the changes stemming from World War II fully explain the response.

It was, of course, because *of* the *cause* but it was relationships that compelled them to go – the connection of one person to another.

At 4:57 a.m. Monday morning Martin Luther King Jr. dispatch a telegram calling on all faith traditions to send clergy to join the citizens of Selma in another march. Among those to whom it was sent was UUA president, Dana McLean Greeley, and among those who responded to the call were James Reeb, Orloff Miller and Clark Olsen.

Jim Reeb was leading a housing program for the American Friends Service Committee in Boston, living the black community of Dorchester, his children enrolled in predominantly black public schools he was totally immersed in efforts at grassroots empowerment of African-American citizens. That Sunday evening Jim and Marie Reeb, were having dinner with the Webbs; Ted Webb, was the UUA Mass Bay District Executive. Together they watched the newsreel of the attack in Selma. Orloff Miller, UUA Director of the UU College Centers, and his wife, Mary Jane, were having dinner with an interracial couple and they watched the slaughter on TV.

The next morning when the call came to Miller on the six floor of the UUA headquarters at 25 Beacon Street he rushed down to meet with Homer Jack, the Director of the Department of Social Responsibility. Homer handed Orloff the telegram. In the margin Dana Greeley had written “See if Homer would alert some of our men to go. And tell Webb.”  Soon they were all working the phones and UUs were preparing to go.

congregation members had called and said they would pay for his ticket.

Prior to the conclusion of the March to Montgomery the members of the congregation in Park Forest, IL challenged their minister, David Bumbaugh, to go. “They listened to [his] reasons for not going, and informed [him] they had an airline ticket and asked, would he use it.  [He] knew that this decision would shape his life and [he] said yes, and along with four or five members of the congregation, flew to Alabama.”

What do you do

when someone says: Go, Go for us, Go with us? It’s about being in relationship.

With whom are you in relationship? Who is it that might call you and say “Shall we go?” and you would say, “Yes.”

I will tell you something else about many who went Selma for the second attempt to cross the William Pettus Bridge. They went not only because of their relationships to one another but because of their relationships to African Americans.

James Reeb was completely committed to working in the black community; Orloff Miller’s roommate at BU was an African American; and when he went to his wedding he found he was the only Euro-American. Homer Jack had first met Martin Luther King, Jr in1954 when Jack and two other colleagues had been among the first white clergy to go South to offer their support to the Montgomery Bus Boycott. That summer Jack preached for Dr. King about Mahatma Gandhi at Dexter Avenue Baptist; in 1957 they traveled to Ghana together for its independence celebration; in 1958 Jack visited Dr. King in the hospital in NYC after King was stabbed. MLK also knew UU Gene Reeves and personally called and asked him to come. Webb meant Ted Webb who had had dinner with the Reebs the night before. It was he who called Jim Reeb. It was probably Dana Greeley who called whose own nephew, Brad Greeley. Brad Greeley then phoned his colleague in Concord and asked “Shall we go?” And they went.  Orloff Miller, who was Director of the Office of College Centers, called students centers across the country and also phoned Jack Taylor who was serving in Champaign-Urbana. Taylor like, Miller, Reeves and MLK had attended the Boston University School of Theology.

There is a pattern. Do you see it?

By Monday evening Jack was in Selma and Brad Greeley, Reeb, Miller and 10 other colleagues and UUA staff were flying to Atlanta. What took them to Selma? Relationships!

For others it was not a matter of being called but being sent. David Johnson in Bloomington, Indiana arrived at church for a meeting and was told by the Board: you are going to represent us and here is the money. By midnight he and a church member were on a plane.

Too often we credit the righteousness of the cause; over-emphasize an ideology commitment to progressive values, and laud moral courage. These do not explain what happened. It was about being in relationship.

What do you do when your friend calls and says ‘I’m going. Join me?’

It was no different for Clark Olsen who was walking beside Reeb and Miller when all three of they were attacked in Selma. Olsen heard of King’s call to Selma on his car radio and by the time he got home Clark Olsen and Bill Jones built a close relationship working while working together as student ministers; Gene Reeves knew Martin Luther King from BU and later worked with Coretta King in Atlanta; Jack Taylor’s mentor was Howard Thurman; in 1942 Homer Jack had been one of the founders of the Congress on Racial Equality; Fred Lipp who went even though a Board member told him going might cost his job had attended Tuskegee Institute during his junior year in college; Viola Luizzo was not only a member of the NAACP but her best friend was Sarah Evans, a black woman. And Charles Blackburn, who was then the minister in Huntsville, was the only white student at Howard School of Divinity in 1958-59.

Theirs were not casual relationships to African Americans.

This brings me back to the question with whom are you in relationship? To whom have you reached out? With whom do you socialize? Is their class, culture or race different than your own? To whom have you built bridges?

To whom do you want to build bridges? What relationship would make a difference in your life – or even transform it?

Flying into Alabama from California Clark Olsen arrive late but caught up with his colleagues and after dinner was walking beside Orloff Miller and James Reeb when they were attacked. Ask Olsen why he went and he puts it succinctly: “I decided to go.”

The “why” that gets offered later as an explanation for going is a guess, an approximation, a hunch, a rationalization and is always secondary to the decision itself. It is about deciding to go, about showing up; it’s not about being deliberative, careful and rational, it’s about feeling compelled.

I cannot know what calls each of you – or your congregations - to action. Is it immigration reform, voter suppression, the environment, disability rights, state sanctioned violence against the unarmed like Michael Brown and Eric Garner, or the slaying of Officers Lui and Ramos? Yes, Black Lives Matter, and Muslims lives matter, and Hispanic lives and those of police officers.

What I know is that when there is a bridge, a connection, a meaningful relationship *its existence* compels you to act. Without it the pull is to remain an observer – outraged and distressed, but still one who gesticulates rather than acts.

I cannot know when a situation like Selma will arise again; neither can any of you. But I can give the names of a more than dozen UUs who helped found NAACP branches, and chapters of the Urban League or CORE. In the South they started Human Relations Councils. I can tell you the names of dozens more who were on local boards. And I already mentioned the personal ties many of those who went to Selma had to black folks. Whether institutional or personal they had relations to African Americans. The bridge was there and when the time came it was an easy, if scary, decision to go.

With whom are you in relationship? Or what’s getting in the way of making them?

It takes a little courage to step out of our comfort zones which we have built into fortresses. It takes some courage because, if we are honest, the unknown is scary. Venturing into unfamiliar settings we inevitably feel off-balance. A situation not in our control and rules of which we are not certain make us anxious. Doubt eats at us and that is good and important. Being careful and cautious and hiding our vulnerabilities is not a recipe for change and transformation.

Why are we were? Not to celebrate but rather to consecrate ourselves. To be transformed you must commit and engage, and let the awkwardness, anxiety and relationship reach in and change you. You can turn differences into dialogue, confusion into understanding, distance into camaraderie but you have to stop making excuses and engage. You can do that because you have the support of Beloved Community. With community as a resource the feelings of reluctance, sense of vulnerability, the doubts and dilemmas you will face, and ways you will get wounded (and you will) can be transformed and used to heal one’s self and the world.

But with whom are you in relationship? A relationship that would compel you to take risk.

On the first Sunday in December I preached for the Netherlands UU Fellowship in Amsterdam. During the Sharing of Joys and Concerns Bill, and older Euro-American male who has lived in Holland since the 80s, got up and lit a candle for Ferguson and Michael Brown. I was surprised and touched. When I told him so after the service he said “My three grandsons are black.”

When someone is that close risk no longer matters. In the context of relationship risk become secondary. When the other becomes your sister, brother, friend, your grandsons you will feel compelled to act and the wider your circle of friends the more often it will happen because you have expanded the boundaries of your heart. We act because we care.

With whom are you in relationship?

And what of your relationship to yourself?

Place yourself in situations where friendships can evolve – that is all I am calling for. Do that and when you act on behalf of justice you will not acting ***for*** others but ***with*** them and ***for*** yourself.

The outpouring of support and the rush to Selma was, of course, because of the righteousness of the cause and magnitude of injustice, but more important was what preceded that moment of decision. For those who lived there relationships gave them courage; for those who came relationships compelled them to go – the connection of one person to another.

Placing the cause first can lead you astray, and ideological commitments certainly will because they regard right belief over right relationship. Not by any means necessary for the ***end*** will always be a manifestation of the means. Being *in* a relationship and working together to address a problem is different. It creates a space, for a creative, shared, non-ideological synergy from which alternatives can spring forth, and you find solidarity in working in common cause – which is what happened (for a time) in Selma in 1965.

Such a commitment is fueled by a yearning – a yearning for meaning in your life; or turning it around - your need to make meaning *of* your life. Conscience urges us on for we have dreamt of a better, more just tomorrow. We still dream. Whenever my life ends I want the comfort of knowing I poured it out for what I valued and those I loved. It’s about being in love with one another, and oneself and this world to which we are wedded; being in love we take whatever risk are necessary. That is what living fully, deeply and with integrity demands – not standing on the side of love but being compelled and consumed by love.

Being in relationship in Beloved Community is essential for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. But, together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed.

1. *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*, Ronald Takaki, Back Bay Books, Boston, 199, p.393 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://cliotropic.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/Shane-Landrum-In-Los-Alamos-2005.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ethel M. Gorman, “Reflections On A Turbulent Time,” March 17, 1985 Birmingham Unitarian Church [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Combined Destinies: Whites Sharing Grief About Racism*, p. 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)