

WESTERN UNION
TELEGRAM

SELMA

A film directed by Ava DuVernay



Jimmie Lee Jackson



Viola Liuzzo



Rev. James Ray

Youth-Friendly Discussion Guide
by Kenny Wiley

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Introduction

In early 2015, Unitarian Universalists and thousands of others worldwide journeyed to theaters to see *Selma*, the 2014 film directed by Ava DuVernay which documents the struggle for voting rights for African Americans between 1963 and 1965.

Unitarian Universalists, including many youth, felt called to see the film. Among those portrayed are two Unitarian Universalists who died supporting the Civil Rights movement: Viola Liuzzo and the Reverend James Reeb. The struggle in *Selma* shows Unitarian Universalism at its finest: Our people lived up to our shared principles, showed up for justice, and gave something of our selves. In his book, [*The Selma Awakening*](#), the Rev. Mark-Morrison Reed argues that in *Selma*, “Unitarian Universalists’ values in practice snapped into alignment with their espoused values.”

This discussion guide invites us to dive into what the film means for our faith and our society in the present day. It guides Unitarian Universalist youth and adults to explore the film and examine how it lifts up the everyday lives of the movement’s leaders.

This guide is appropriate for youth groups, young adult groups, campus groups, adult discussion groups, cross-generational groups, and families with youth. Although the plans are written for a one-hour session, a group that wishes to delve deeply could easily extend their discussion to 90 minutes or more. This guide suggests follow-up materials for continued individual and group reflection, learning, and action.

About the Author

Kenny Wiley serves as both a Senior Editor of *UU World* magazine and the Director of Faith Formation for Prairie Unitarian Universalist Church in Parker, Colorado. A third-generation UU with roots in the Southwestern UU Conference and the Mountain Desert District, Kenny is the GA Talks Coordinator for Young Adults at the 2015 General Assembly. He is an active member of the Denver Freedom Riders, which has taken the lead in Black Lives Matter organizing in the Denver area.

Goals

- Provide a framework to respond to *Selma*
- Explore the ways the film lifts up the everyday lives of Civil Rights movement leaders
- Explore Unitarian Universalist connections to the 1965 events in Selma
- Invite participants to reflect on the meaning and challenge of *Selma* for us today.

Materials

- Name badges, if any participants are not part of an established group whose members are familiar with one another
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Optional: For Closing, a music player or a computer with Internet access, and a recording of or link to “Ella’s Song” by Sweet Honey in the Rock

Preparation

- View the film.
- Review this discussion guide and consider your own responses to the questions.
- Write these covenant points on newsprint and post:
 - We agree to speak from our own experiences and perspectives, and to present our statements as our thoughts rather than as indisputable truths.
 - We agree to listen respectfully and intently to the experiences and perspectives of other people.
 - We agree to pay attention to the group process, making sure that everyone has the opportunity to speak and to listen.
 - *Selma* is a film based on a true story. It is not a documentary. We agree not to get bogged down in historical details, but rather to seek the essence of the film.
 - We agree to use this time as an opportunity for ethical, religious, and spiritual discernment, rather than as a time to debate public policy.

- Set up and test music player. Prepare to play “Ella’s Song” during the Closing; [this version on YouTube](#) runs a little over five minutes. A version from the 1988 album, *Breaths*, available for [purchase online](#), runs almost six minutes.

Opening Reading/Chalice Lighting (2 minutes)

Welcome participants. Then, light the chalice and offer these words from “Ella’s Song,” by Sweet Honey in the Rock, explaining that the song is dedicated to Ella Baker and drawn from her words. Ella Baker was an advisor for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960s and a tireless advocate for youth.

*And that which touches me most is that I had a chance to work with people
Passing on to others that which was passed on to me*

*To me young people come first, they have the courage where we fail
And if I can shed some light as they carry us through the gale*

*The older I get the better I know that the secret of my going on
Is when the reins are in the hand of the young who dare to run against the storm*

*Not needing to clutch for power, not needing the light just to shine on me
I need to be just one in the number as we stand against tyranny*

Creating a Covenant (5 minutes)

Indicate the covenant points you have written on newsprint and posted. Propose them as guidelines. Ask if any points need to be clarified, added, or amended. Note changes on newsprint. When the covenant is complete, invite participants to voice or signal agreement.

Introductions and First Impressions (10 minutes)

Invite participants to introduce themselves and respond, with a sentence or two, to these questions:

- What strikes you as most powerful about the film?
- What stays with you after viewing *Selma*?

Ask that each person speak briefly, in turn, uninterrupted.

Discussion: Civil Rights Leaders (15 minutes)

Say:

Many critics who praised *Selma* noted its portrayal of Civil Rights movement leaders as real, flawed, sometimes struggling people. *Grantland* film critic Wesley Morris writes, “The movie is so big that when King needs his own uplift, he phones Mahalia Jackson (Ledisi Young), rousing her from sleep, and tells her, ‘I need to hear God’s voice,’ which prompts her to sing while her husband continues to sleep behind her.”

Use these questions to lead a discussion about the portrayal of civil rights leaders in the film, allowing about 10 minutes for this part of the discussion.

1. How is it powerful to see well known civil rights leaders in moments of doubt and despair?
2. What statement does *Selma* make about the importance of community in building and sustaining social change movements?

Then say:

Selma highlights tensions between the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Martin Luther King, Jr.’s organization, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “snick”), which included John Lewis and Ella Baker. Part of the conflict was strategic, and some of it revolved around age. SNCC felt that because their members were young people, their voices were ignored in deference to one leader—Dr. King—and his wishes.

Ask: “Was SNCC’s criticism of the SCLC fair? Does great leadership mean one leader, a few, or many?” Allow five minutes for this part of the discussion.

Discussion: Relevance for Today (15 minutes)

Say:

For many, *Selma* resonates because it speaks to today as well as to the 1960s. *Denver Post* film critic Lisa Kennedy writes, “We'd miss an opportunity if we ignored the atmosphere in which *Selma* arrives. The litany is vexing and abridged here: Ferguson. The aftermath of Eric Garner's death and the killings of New York City police officers Wenjian Liu and Rafael Ramos.

[On January 15]...an incendiary device was detonated outside the Colorado Springs office of the NAACP. ...*Selma* should resonate but also challenge.”

Then, pose this question:

Though our contemporary circumstances are different, the movie *Selma* and the 50th anniversary of the events depicted in the film arrive at a crossroads of our country's response to racial injustice. What lessons can we, as people of faith, take from *Selma* considering the present racial climate? Are we called to act in some way? If so, how?

Closing Thoughts: Our Responsibility (13 minutes)

Remind participants that Dr. King delivered a stirring eulogy at the memorial service for Rev. James Reeb. Share this quote:

Naturally, we are compelled to ask the question, Who killed James Reeb? The answer is simple and rather limited, when we think of the who. He was murdered by a few sick, demented, and misguided men who have the strange notion that you express dissent through murder... What killed James Reeb? When we move from the who to the what, the blame is wide and the responsibility grows... He was murdered by the irrelevancy of a church that will stand amid social evil and serve as a taillight rather than a headlight, an echo rather than a voice...

So, in his death, James Reeb says something to each of us, black and white alike—says that we must substitute courage for caution, says to us that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered him, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murder.

Say:

Unitarian Universalists James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo felt called to act. How does your Unitarian Universalist faith call you to act? Do you agree with Dr. King that the responsibility for injustice falls at the feet of all?

Then, offer more words from “Ella’s Song,” by Sweet Honey in the Rock, or share an audio or video version of the song, which can be found [on YouTube](#) and also on the [1988 album *Breaths*](#).

*We who believe in freedom cannot rest
We who believe in freedom cannot rest until it comes
Until the killing of Black men, Black mothers’ sons
Is as important as the killing of White men, White mothers’ sons
We who believe in freedom cannot rest.*

Invite participants to share a word or phrase that expresses their thoughts or feelings after the movie and discussion.

Thank participants. Extinguish the chalice.

Additional Discussion Questions

If you have more time, you may wish to use these additional discussion questions:

1. The film informs us that Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo were murdered for their involvement in the Civil Rights movement in Selma. Many Unitarian Universalists have pointed out that their faith—our faith—was not mentioned in the film. Does this strike you as problematic? Is it important for Unitarian Universalists living out their faith values in the world to publicly identify as UU? Does our faith need the credit?
2. The film shows a second march to the Edmund Pettus Bridge after out-of-state supporters, including clergy, arrive. Dr. King elects to turn the march around. Many other leaders in the movement disagreed with or were confused by Dr.

King's decision. What do you make of the decision Dr. King made? Do you think it was appropriate for one person to have the power to make such a decision? Do you think the fact that Dr. King held such power benefitted the movement, or not? Why?

3. Teaching about horrific events from United States history, such as actions by law enforcement and elected officials at Selma, makes some school systems and educators in uncomfortable. When stories are told truthfully, American law enforcement and political figures sometimes appear in a negative light. Do you believe honesty about American history—both the good and the bad—is important, or not? Why?

Find Out More

[*The Selma Awakening: How the Civil Rights Movement Tested and Changed Unitarian Universalism*](#), by Mark Morrison-Reed (Skinner, 2014); a [companion guide](#) for this book offers audio interviews and information about congregational responses to Selma.

[Call to Selma](#) is a 40-minute activity from "God's Gonna Trouble the Water: Martyrs and Sacrifice," a workshop in the adult Tapestry of Faith program, Faith Like a River: Themes in Unitarian Universalist History.

[Southern Witness: Unitarians and Universalists in the Civil Rights Era](#), by Gordon Gibson (Skinner, 2015) gives an engaging account of the roles UU individuals and congregations played in the Civil Rights movement in the South in the 1950s and '60s.

Two collections of worship resources from the UUA Worship Web are [Selma Sunday](#) and [Black Lives Matter](#).

Online, watch newscaster [Melissa Harris-Perry's interview with Selma director, Ava DuVernay](#) (31:49).

Learn about Ella Baker and how her words and life inspired the Sweet Honey in the Rock song, "Ella's Song," on the website of the [Ella Baker Center for Human Rights](#).