

Responding to the Prophetic Voice

A Service by Laurie Stuart

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PRELUDE

CALL TO WORSHIP

Come into this place of peace
And let its silence heal your spirit,
Come into this place of memory
And let its history warm your soul;
Come into this place of prophecy and power
And let its vision change your heart.

William F. Schulz

HYMN #350: The Ceaseless Flow of Endless Time

CHALICE LIGHTING

At times our own light goes out and is rekindled by a spark from another person. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us.

READING (Excerpt from a Martin Luther King sermon "A Knock at Midnight")

This excerpt was published in a book of King's sermons as "A Knock at Midnight." The reference to midnight comes of Jesus' illustration of a neighbors' response to a persistent friend seeking bread at midnight. King notes that while many look to the church during their time of need, hundreds and thousands of men and women in quest for the bread of social justice leave disappointed.

"The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its poetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral and spiritual authority. If the church does not participate actively in the struggle for peace and for economic and racial justice, it will forfeit the loyalty of millions and cause people everywhere to say that it has atrophied its will. But if the church will free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, and, recovering its great historic mission, will speak and act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace, it will enkindle the imagination of mankind and fire the souls of men, imbuing them with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace. People far and near will know the church as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travelers at midnight."

SERMON: Responding to the Prophetic Voice

Last week I had the opportunity to go to the movie Selma. It was playing at the Lowe 10 Theater in Westbury. When I arrived at 6:45 for the 7:15 showtime, there was already a long line of moviegoers. Black and white together we waited, and then were ushered into a theater that seated 400.

It was exciting that there were so many people there. It was exciting that it was a mixed crowd and, as the credit rolled, it was intriguing to see that Oprah Winfield and Brad Pitt produced the film, in collaboration with other small and large film companies. It was a balm that relieved my aching heart, which has been torn apart this week with the violence of ideology.

The film is great – and Unitarian Universalists were highly featured in the figures of minister James Reeb, in volunteer Viola Luizzo, and in the closing moments when King recites the chorus of the Battle Hymn of the Republic “Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord”, written by Unitarian Julia Ward Howe. And while these figures played large, there was no mention of their affiliation with Unitarian Universalism. Many of us don’t know our Unitarian Universalist heritage and many of us are wrestling with how we can bring the presence of Unitarian Universalism into our aching world. I believe that it begins with our own awareness. It begins with understanding that sometimes our histories are somehow recorded as the accomplishments of great heroes and leaders and not the grass-root truth that it was people, individually contributing. A story in yesterday’s **Times** about the photo exhibit “Freedom Journey 1965: Photographs of the Selma to Montgomery March by Stephen Somerstein,” at the New York Historical Society, (in which James Reeb being a Unitarian Minister was mentioned) notes how the movie Selma highlights Martin Luther King’s contribution and fails to accurately acknowledge that it was a long, dusty, down-to-earth trudge on the part of thousands of citizens.

So let us begin by briefly talking about a civil rights activist Ella Baker. Ella, who lived from 1903 to 1986, was an African-American civil rights and human rights activist who began her career in the 1930s. She was a behind-the-scenes activist, who worked alongside some of the most famous civil rights leaders of the 20th century for 50 years, including co-founder of the NAACP, W. E. B. Du Bois, Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, Black Union Leader A. Philip Randolph, and Minister Martin Luther King, Jr. She also mentored many emerging activists such as Diane Nash, Stokely Carmichael, Rosa Parks, and Bob Moses.

She believed in a *participatory* democracy and a collective style of leadership. She is quoted to have said, “You didn't see me on television; you didn't see news stories about me. The kind of role

that I tried to play was to pick up pieces or put together pieces out of which I hoped organization might come. My theory is strong people don't need strong leaders.”

She didn't care much for the male hierarchy of the Black Church or of the civil rights movement. She believed that individuals needed to be courageous and to become advocates for their own free life. It was then that collectively we could guide organizations to strengthen communities so that all of us can thrive.

I identify with Ella's concept of leadership – picking up the pieces or putting together the pieces that would fuse individual talents and contributions into strong organizational structure and mission. But at this time when it is easy to become overwhelmed with our busyness, how will we each be courageous and to become advocates for our own free lives? The key, the first step, is to increase our awareness and fully embody the notion that we have something to offer.

In 2006, Amnesty International developed a creative human rights campaign designed to do just that. Bring an awareness of human rights into our world. Using actual photographs of human rights abuses, a person being tortured, a hungry child, a father carrying his injured son, a woman being threatened by a gun-carrying official, the campaign superimposes those images onto life-sized shots of the city landscape. The hungry child looks like he is right there on the sidewalk. The father looks like he's walking toward you. The woman looks like she is sitting in the bus enclosure. The campaign is designed wake people up to the idea that while the particular occurrence is not happening in our community, it is happening somewhere. The slogan is: It's not happening here, but it's happening now. And what Amnesty International is trying to do is to increase people's awareness that there is real work to be done and that we all need to act on our values and insist, “Enough of this. Now.”

Usually, we're really good at responding when it's in our community, but we're not always so willing when it seems to be happening far away from us.

Such was not the case with Viola Luizzo, a 39-year-old Michigan mother of five. She saw the news reports of what came to be known as Bloody Sunday, where 600 marchers were brutally attacked as they crested the arch of the Edmund Pettis Bridge over the Alabama River on March 7, 1965. She heard the news that James Reeb, a young Massachusetts Unitarian Universalist minister who had responded to King's telegram two days later asking clergy and others to come to Selma, had died from a head wound he received when he and two other UU ministers were assaulted as they walked from a restaurant to the chapel where King was to speak.

She attended a memorial service for Reeb at the First Unitarian Universalist Church in Detroit, a congregation she had joined just a year before. She participated in a march in sympathy with the Selma protests on the campus of Wayne State, where she was a student. And she called her husband that evening and told him that there were "too many people who just stand around talking," and that she had to help and that she was going to Selma for a week.

Her friend and childcare provider Sarah Evans warned her that it was dangerous. Voting rights activists had been working in the area for two years. Only 1% of the black population in Selma was registered to vote due to systematic refusal to open the office when African Americans came to register.

At a voter rights demonstration in nearby Marion, AL, a young black man, Jimmy Lee Jackson, had been killed by police. In fact, it was his death that prompted the Selma to Montgomery March in the first place. (Rev. Diane Miller, *Running Justice off the Road*; A sermon delivered on January 20, 2008 at the Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church.)

Viola was no stranger to matters of justice. With the encouragement of Sarah, she had become active in the Detroit chapter of the NAACP. That same year, Sarah and Viola had driven to New York City to attend a United Nations seminar on civil rights sponsored by the Unitarian Universalist Association. She was not naïve or unprepared when she left for Selma. She believed in justice and in helping to bring it about. (Miller.)

Viola arrived in Selma three days later and was quickly put to work registering volunteers at the welcome table at the Brown Chapel, an African Methodist Episcopal Church that was the headquarters for the march. On Sunday, March 21, thousands crossed the Pettis Bridge. This time they had a court order and US Army troops, FBI agents and Federal Marshalls, activated by President Lyndon Johnson, to protect them. Viola crossed the bridge, then returned to Brown Chapel for the next two days to continue her work and make numerous airport runs to pick up the people who continued to stream in. On Wednesday, she drove to Montgomery and stayed overnight at a Catholic center just inside the Montgomery city limits.

On Thursday morning, she and others climbed up the tower of the Catholic center to watch the approach of the group, which swelled to 25,000 on the final day. When she came down from the tower, unsettled and anxious, she told Timothy Deasy, one of the parish priests, "Father, I have a feeling of apprehension. Something is going to happen today. Someone is going to be killed." (Miller)

She joined the march for the last four miles to the State Capitol and the concluding rally for voter rights.

“After the speeches were over, Viola met up with Leroy Moton, a black teen who had been driving people to the airport in her car that day. Together, they drove a carload of tired marchers from Montgomery back to Selma. People in several cars taunted the biracial group in the car with Michigan plates, hitting the bumpers, flashing headlights and, at one point, boxing her in on the highway. Later, the passengers recalled that Viola sang freedom songs as she drove. She and Leroy dropped off the passengers and headed back to Montgomery. It was late, and few cars were on the road.

“In Selma, they were spotted at a stoplight by four members of the Ku Klux Klan, who followed them as they headed out along Highway 80. Viola tried to outrun the Klansmen in her car. As the Klansmen pulled up alongside, Viola turned to look in their direction. The Klansmen aimed and fired, killing her instantly. The car veered off the highway into a ditch and came to a stop against a fence. Leroy was covered with blood, but unhurt. When the Klan group circled around and went to the car to take a look, Leroy played dead. After they left, he ran for miles to find help. “(Miller.)

With her death, Viola became a civil rights martyr and within five months the House and the Senate passed the Voting Act of 1965 and it was signed into law. Of course, there’s more to the story; an FBI informant was part of the group of Klansman so the perpetrators were arrested; Viola became the target of a smear campaign; and after many years, she was honored as a everyday champion of justice and civil liberties. Her name is engraved at the Civil Rights Memorial, and her story, a courageous woman following her conscience, was finally told. In an interview, her now grown daughters say that they would not change anything about Viola’s life. She fulfilled her destiny; her life made a difference in bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice. Because of her death, the death of a white woman, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was signed into law.

And now we fast forward to today. Today, in many southern states, voting rights are being systematically repressed. Using detailed data analysis, voting districts are being redrawn and, in North Carolina, have resulted in the state governor, house and senate now being controlled by ideological conservative Republican politics.

If you’re interested in learning more about the threat to democracy that is happening in North Carolina, I encourage you to watch the Bill Moyers segment called State of Conflict: North Carolina. <http://billmoyers.com/segment/north-carolina-battleground-state/>

In this 40-minute broadcast, he makes the case that a wealthy ultra conservative, Art Pope, through his money, has basically taken over the democracy. The point Moyers is making is that if one person can do it in North Carolina, then it can, and will, be done throughout the country, if people don't take it back somehow.

It's not happening here, but it's happening now.

In opposition to this roll back of civil rights, the NAACP is again at the forefront of organizing. In 2013, its facilitation of the Moral Mondays movement, 924 citizens were inspired to be arrested at the state capital. Every Monday, people, lay and clergy would peacefully enter the state capital building to protest state interference in free and accessible elections. In 2014, North Carolina NAACP President, The Rev. William Barber put out the call for people to come to Raleigh on February 8, in what would be the biggest civil rights gathering since Selma. The UU Standing on the Side of the Love Campaign and UUA President Peter Morales supported the call. Many Unitarian Universalists were part of the 80,000-person gathering.

The movement has spread to other states and a quick perusal of the Moral Monday Georgia website, reveals a well-organized coalition of organizations dealing with gun violence, Black Lives Matter, and voting registration campaigns as well as a sea of Standing on the Side of Love yellow teeshirts.

So what does that mean for us in Freeport. In thinking back to that Amnesty International advertising campaign, I ask, how do we understand that these restrictions of civil rights do affect us? How do we collective strategize to build resilience and resistance to oppression? How do we want to respond, individually and collectively?

And that's the rub; that's what's difficult. We have a wide range of experiences in our lives, and we're all at different points. How do we embody this spirit, this call to justice as Unitarian Universalists?

I'd like to pause in our service and give you an opportunity to answer those questions and to write them down and add them to our chalice. These questions are: What social justice challenge is the most important to you? What can you do to be a part of a solution or exploration and what support do you need from this congregation?

(The reflections of the congregation were written down and placed in the lattice chalice located in the foyer.)

I was a teenager during the Vietnam War. I graduated high school in 1974. And it was right at that same time I was starting to learn the guitar and began playing out. I remember practicing Phil Oakes' "Draft Dodger Rag." It's an antiwar goof song and it was one of the few songs of resistance, besides the old standards, that I was comfortable singing.

I very much wanted to be singing songs of resistance but I was very uncomfortable with the often-angry language and name-calling. I remembered this feeling and this sorrow this week as I was practicing our closing song, "Bound for Freedom."

With tears of joy, I realized that I resonated with the words and the call to action in Bound for Freedom by Emma's Revolution. I HAD found songs that inspired me and invited others into determination and resistance. I didn't have to sing angry songs. I had to find songs that served the cause and that I could wholeheartedly sing.

In a sermon he delivered in 1968 called the "Drum Major Instinct," Martin Luther King Jr. preached: "Everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your 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."

Viola Luizzo worked the welcome table. Ella Baker organized behind the scenes. There is no messiah to save us. It's up to you and me.

So what you can do for justice in our world? What can this congregation do together? How can this congregation put its name and its body out even further in the Long Island community than it has and, in the paraphrased words of Martin Luther King Jr., free itself from the shackles of a deadening status quo, recover its great historic mission, and be willing to speak to act fearlessly and insistently in terms of justice and peace?

It is then, and it is now that we will enkindle the imagination of and fire the souls of humankind, imbuing us all with a glowing and ardent love for truth, justice, and peace. People far and near will know this congregation as a great fellowship of love that provides light and bread for lonely travelers at midnight.

It IS happening here and it IS happening now.

Thank you for joining YOUR voice. Thank you for all of OUR voices. Thank you for EACH ONE of our contributions to bringing peace and justice into this world.

This is our legacy. We will overcome when we invite everyone into the conversation and acknowledge their unique gifts. Amen. Blessed be.

Closing Song: “Bound for Freedom”

Spoken Benediction

Cheered by our community, blessed by our covenant, uplifted in mind, and renewed in spirit, go forth with courage and in peace to meet the days to come. Amen.

Burton D. Carley