

**MY JOURNEY TO SELMA FOR THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF BLOODY SUNDAY
SPEECH TO DUNDAS ROTARY CLUB
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How did a 40 year old Canadian Unitarian woman end up in Selma, Alabama for the 50th Anniversary of Bloody Sunday?

Before I tell that story I need to take you back 50 years ago.

Federal law stated that Black American Citizens could vote, but on the State Level racist laws took away that right.

Under the leadership of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. activists planned to peacefully march from Selma, Alabama to the state capital of Montgomery, Alabama to bring attention to the voter suppression that blacks faced in the Southern US.

The first march happened on March 7, 1965 and Rev. King was not present for it. Instead, marching at the front was John Lewis. ¹

He recalls that historic moment in his Memoir, *Walking In The Wind*:

"We set out, nearly six hundred of us. We walked two abreast, in a pair of lines that stretched for several blocks.

I can't count the number of marches I have participated in in my lifetime, but there was something peculiar about this one. It was more than disciplined. It was sombre and subdued, almost like a funeral procession. No one was jostling or pushing to get to the front, as often happened with these things. I don't know if there was a feeling that something was going to happen, or if the people simply sensed that this was a special procession, a "leaderless" march. There were no big names up front, no celebrities. This was just plain folk walking through the streets of Selma.

When we reached the crest of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, I stopped dead still.

There, facing us at the bottom of the other side, stood a sea of blue-helmeted, blue-uniformed Alabama State troopers, line after line of them, dozens of battle-ready lawmen stretched from one side of US Highway 80 to the other.

"This is an unlawful assembly," Major John Cloud pronounced from his bullhorn. "You are ordered to disperse and go back to your church or your homes."

"May we have a word with the major?" asked Hosea.

“There is no word to be had,” answered Cloud; “You have two minutes to turn around and go back to your church.”

I wasn’t about to turn around. We were there. We were not going to run. We couldn’t turn back even if we wanted to. There were too many people.

There was only one option left that I could see.

“We should kneel and pray,”

I turned and passed the word back to begin bowing down in a prayerful manner.

But that word didn’t get far. It didn’t have time. One minute after he had issued his warning Major Cloud issued an order.

“Troopers,” he barked. “Advance!”

And then all hell broke loose. ²

Roy Reed, a reporter for The New York Times, describes what he saw:

The troopers rushed forward, their blue uniforms and white helmets blurring into a flying wedge as they moved.

The wedge moved with such force that it seemed almost to pass over the waiting column instead of through it.

The first 10 or 20 Negroes were swept to the ground screaming, arms and legs flying, and packs and bags went skittering across the grassy divider strip and on the pavement on both sides.

Those still on their feet retreated.

The troopers continued pushing, using both the force of their bodies and the prodding of their nightsticks.

A cheer went up from the white spectators lining the south side of the highway.

The mounted possemen spurred their horses and rode on at a run into the retreating mass. The Negroes cried out as they crowded together for protection, and the whites on the sidelines whooped and cheered.

The Negroes paused in the retreat for perhaps a minute, still screaming and huddling together.

Suddenly there was a sound like a gunshot and a grey cloud spewed over the troopers and the Negroes.

“Tear gas!” someone yelled.

The cloud began covering the highway. Newsmen, who were confined by four troopers to a corner 100 yards away, began to lose sight of the action.

But before the cloud finally hid it all, there were several seconds of unobstructed view. Fifteen or twenty nightsticks could be seen through the gas, flailing at the heads of the marchers.

The Negroes broke and ran. Scores of them streamed across the parking lot of the Selma Tractor Company. Troopers and possemen, mounted and unmounted, went after them. ³.

A United Press International Reporter continued the story:

“The troopers and possemen, under Gov. George C. Wallace’s orders to stop the Negroes’ “Walk For Freedom” from Selma to Montgomery, chased the screaming, bleeding marchers nearly a mile back to their church, clubbing them as they ran.

Ambulances screamed in relays between Good Samaritan Hospital and Brown’s Chapel Church, carrying hysterical men, women, and children suffering head wounds and tear gas burns.” ⁴.

That night CBS aired the film Judgement at Nuremberg ⁵, about the Nazi war crime trials. CBS interrupted the broadcast to show images from Selma taken earlier that day. The parallels between the injustice Jews faced under the Nazi regime and what Blacks in Alabama had just experienced were too stark and too real for viewers to ignore. People were outraged.

Rev. Martin Luther King then asked clergy to join him in Selma for another march. Clergy and white allies from across the USA and the world responded to his call. One was Rev. James Reeb, a Unitarian Universalist Minister from Boston. Another was Viola Liuzzo, a wife and mother and UU from Detroit.

Another March happened on March 9, 1965. ⁶

Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo participated, but the group which now included Rev. King only made it halfway across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, before turning around. So Rev. Reeb along with several of his Unitarian Universalist colleagues stayed in Selma for another night waiting to hear what the movement's next steps would be. Rev. Reeb had dinner at Walker's Café along with Rev. Orloff Miller and Rev. Clark Olsen. After calling their wives from the pay phone in the restaurant to let them know they were safe and would be staying in Selma for at least another night they walked to Brown's Chapel and were attacked by a half dozen white locals who beat them with baseball bats and pipes.

Rev. Reeb would not survive the attack.

When the news of his death became known to the nation even more people responded to Rev. King's call and came to show their solidarity.

On March 15, 1965 US President Lyndon Johnson addressed the nation in a nationally televised joint session of congress and asked for the passing of his new voting rights bill so blacks would no longer be denied the right to vote. ⁷.

On March 21, 1965 the third Civil Rights March from Selma to Montgomery began. On March 25, 1965 the marchers reached the end of their journey and listened to Rev. King give these inspiring words in front of Alabama's State Capital Building. ⁸.

"How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." ⁹.

That night Viola Liuzzo drove several black marchers back home to Selma from Montgomery and was assassinated by members of the Klu Klux Klan while driving along a road in Selma.

On August 6, 1965 President Johnson's Voting Rights Act was passed. ¹⁰.

To mark this important civil rights anniversary the Unitarian Universalist Association decided to hold a conference in Birmingham, Alabama called Marching in the Arc of Justice on the weekend of the 50th Anniversary of Bloody Sunday. My heart yearned to go, but I couldn't see how it would be possible for me to afford the airfare, hotel, and registration to Alabama. ¹¹.

In January 2015 I went to visit my Minister at The First Unitarian Church of Hamilton, the Rev. Victoria Ingram, to ask her if there was any funds available from either our church or the Canadian Unitarian Council to send me to Selma. She told me to check out the website for the conference and see if there are any scholarships and/or bursaries. There were scholarships to the conference, but the website said they wanted

to grant them to people of colour, youth and veterans of the civil rights movement. I was none of those things, but I filled out an application form and sent it off. I also sent in a registration form to just attend Sunday's March as the likelihood of me being granted a scholarship seemed slim to none.

Two weeks later my friends and I saw the film Selma at Ancaster Silvercity Cinemas. The theatre was packed, not an empty seat to be found, and by the end of the film there wasn't a dry eye in the place.

During this same time I was also looking for a new home. My friend and I were both having major drama with the rental properties we were living in and were on the hunt for a house we could rent together.

At the end of the month we found the perfect home in Hamilton's East End and on January 30th we signed our lease and paid our first month's rent to our new landlords. We would be taking possession of the place and moving in come March. At this point I wrote off any possibility of me taking a trip to Selma, Alabama. My life for the next month would be about packing and preparing to move. Any funds I had would be going towards my move.

The very next day, January 31st, I got a phone call from a Reverend James Hobart who was a part of the organizing team for the Marching in The Arc of Justice Conference. I assumed he wanted to follow up with me regarding the registration I had sent in for the Sunday that I hadn't paid for yet. To my shock and surprise he was calling me to congratulate me and let me know that I had been awarded a Scholarship. I was stunned. I found out some time later that they received over 60 applications and I was one of 20 people who were awarded a scholarship. My being Canadian was one of the reasons the application caught their eye.

Crap! I can't say no to this opportunity. I didn't know how I was going to juggle, packing, moving, and a trip to Selma all before I moved in Mid-March, but damn it I was going to figure out a way. My Scholarship paid for my hotel room and registration, but I would have to pay for my airfare on my own and I also needed to get a passport.

The stars aligned and happily everything came together and on Friday, March 6th my Minister dropped me off at the Buffalo Airport and I got on a plane and was on my way to Birmingham, Alabama.

I got to my hotel had dinner and listened to CT Vivian. Vivian was one of Rev. King's lieutenant's during the civil rights movement and was in Selma for the historic civil rights marches.

The next morning the NAACP's Rev. Dr. William Barber, II would have the entire hall on their feet when he said: "We need a moral movement with a moral descent. The heart of our nation needs reviving. It's in a Code Blue. It's time to be America's defibrillator TODAY!" ¹².

Then Opal Tometi one of the Co-Founders of the Black Lives Matter movement spoke and that afternoon my friend Rev. Krista Taves along with Brittini Gray co-facilitated a workshop called Black Lives Matter: Ferguson and Beyond.

We were in Birmingham on Saturday, but President Obama and dignitaries from across the country including a now Congressman John Lewis, were already in Selma at the foot of the Edmund Pettus Bridge. In the lobby of the Birmingham Sheraton Hotel a large group had gathered in front of a TV to listen to Obama give a barn burner speech. Here is some of what he said:

"As we commemorate their achievement, we are well-served to remember that at the time of the marches, many in power condemned rather than praised them. Back then, they were called Communists, half-breeds, outside agitators, sexual and moral degenerates, and worse – everything but the name their parents gave them. Their faith was questioned. Their lives were threatened. Their patriotism was challenged.

And yet, what could be more American than what happened in this place?

What could more profoundly vindicate the idea of America than plain and humble people – the unsung, the downtrodden, the dreamers not of high station, not born to wealth or privilege, not of one religious tradition but many – coming together to shape their country's course?

What greater expression of faith in the American experiment than this; what greater form of patriotism is there; than the belief that America is not yet finished, that we are strong enough to be self-critical, that each successive generation can look upon our imperfections and decide that it is in our power to remake this nation to more closely align with our highest ideals?

Meanwhile, the Voting Rights Act, the culmination of so much blood and sweat and tears, the product of so much sacrifice in the face of wanton violence, stands weakened, its future subject to partisan rancor.

How can that be? The Voting Rights Act was one of the crowning achievements of our democracy, the result of Republican and Democratic effort. President Reagan signed its renewal when he was in office. President Bush signed its renewal when he was in office. One hundred Members of Congress have come here today to honor people who were willing to die for the right it protects. If we want to honor this day, let these hundred

go back to Washington, and gather four hundred more, and together, pledge to make it their mission to restore the law this year.

Of course, our democracy is not the task of Congress alone, or the courts alone, or the President alone. If every new voter suppression law was struck down today, we'd still have one of the lowest voting rates among free peoples.

Fifty years ago, registering to vote here in Selma and much of the South meant guessing the number of jellybeans in a jar or bubbles on a bar of soap. It meant risking your dignity, and sometimes, your life. What is our excuse today for not voting? How do we so casually discard the right for which so many fought? How do we so fully give away our power, our voice, in shaping America's future?" ¹³.

I was pretty pumped after Obama's speech and then partook in Rev. Morrison-Reed's workshop the Sankofa moment. After dinner and a concert it was off to bed to get ready for the trip to Selma.

Sunday morning we all boarded buses. I was wearing my Black Lives Matter shirt. After stopping for lunch and visiting some historic sites we unloaded at a park in Selma and got ourselves organized for the march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

The sea of humanity in Selma was overwhelming. I have attended Toronto Pride for several years where easily over a million people attend the March. The amount of people who had descended upon this small Southern Town was mind blowing. We weren't so much marching as slowly shuffling along with the waves and waves of people who had come to mark this historic occasion.

There was such a collective spirit of love on that Bridge that day. Everyone wanted to honour the memory of the sacrifices made on that bridge 50 years ago. People took selfies and videos. Complete strangers helped to take pictures of other complete strangers. People sang songs and danced. The energy on that bridge was joyous. Everyone seemed to be radiating with the collective will to be better human beings that day.

We got back on our buses to Birmingham and sang protest and gospel songs the entire drive. A bus filled with UUs who not only walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge that day, but some had 50 years ago as well.

Monday morning I was on a plane that would take me back to Buffalo where I would connect with my Minister who would drive me back to Hamilton.

But my adventure wasn't over. Before I left for Selma, The Hamilton Spectator's Jeff Mahoney wrote an article about my trip and about the Hamilton Clergy who travelled to

Selma 50 years ago. ¹⁴. One of those clergy read that article and was current living with his wife at a Senior's Residence in Beamsville. Only a day or two after I moved into my home I was on another adventure. Retired United Church Minister Rev. Jerry Elliott and I swapped stories and this led to a second Spec story. ¹⁵.

Then a friend of mine on Facebook who was a part of a group called Hamilton Photos from the Past made me aware of a photo that was posted to it of the Hamilton Clergy who travelled together to Selma 50 years ago. ¹⁶. The person who posted it was trying to find out the names of all the men in it.

I connected with the person who posted the photograph, Ramona Kapetz-Matthews, and helped her identify the men in it with assistance from the Hamilton Public Library's archives staff and the Hamilton Spectator's archives staff. She was the daughter-in-law of the Rev. Allen Mathews, a Baptist Minister from Hamilton.

She had been asked to speak at Beth Jacob Synagogue about her Father-In-Law and his journey to Selma which included the Temple's former Rabbi, Eugene Weiner. I shared all the archival stories and photos I had uncovered with her including a photo of Rabbi Weiner standing next to Rev. King at the funeral of UU Minister Rev. James Reeb in Selma from Rev. Mark Morrison-Reed's book *The Selma Awakening*. ¹⁷.

She shared this reading from Morrison-Reed's book with the congregants at Beth Jacob: "At the funeral service in Selma for Rev. James Reeb, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. just finished his Eulogy and Dana McLean Greeley offered a prayer that began "God of our Fathers and of our future" and ended with the Lord's Prayer. Then everyone rose and sang "We Shall Overcome". When we had sung four stanzas, we hummed, and a rabbi, [Eugene Weiner] who had been asked to give the benediction, stepped to the pulpit. He repeated in Hebrew the great Kaddish, the memorial prayer for the dead, over our humming. As he completed it, we sang again, and from nowhere there came two little Negro girls who began to sing a high piercing descant above our singing. The rabbi leaned down, picked up the four-year-old, and held her in his arms. And the tears flowed down my face. And all around him, people were crying." ¹⁸.

After the worship Rabbi Selsberg invited Ramona, her husband and I to join him and his family and friends at his home next week for Passover Seder. Moments like these (Multi-Generations and Multi-Faiths sharing in an ancient ritual) make me think of the 7th Unitarian Universalist Principle: "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part." Imagine all the interconnections, small and large, that brought us together to share in Passover Seder in the spirit of Martin Luther King, who's faith lead him to seek justice.

My journey hasn't ended yet. Even more Hamiltonians have approached me to tell me that they too journeyed to Selma 50 years ago. I still need to make dates with them and

sit down and hear their stories before I give an entire worship service at my Unitarian Church at the end of September about my Selma adventures.

Common and John Legend's words at this year's Academy Awards when they accepted their Best Original Song Oscars for composing Glory for the film Selma put my journey into perspective.

Common started off the moving speech:

"Recently, John and I got to go to Selma and perform "Glory" on the same bridge that Dr. King and the people of the civil rights movement marched on 50 years ago. This bridge was once a landmark of a divided nation, but now is a symbol for change. The spirit of this bridge transcends race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, and social status. The spirit of this bridge connects the kid from the South side of Chicago, dreaming of a better life to those in France standing up for their freedom of expression to the people in Hong Kong protesting for democracy. This bridge was built on hope. Welded with compassion. And elevated by love for all human beings." 19.

Then John Legend took to the microphone, building off those sentiments:

"Nina Simone said it's an artist's duty to reflect the times in which we live. We wrote this song for a film that was based on events that were 50 years ago, but we say Selma is now, because the struggle for justice is right now. We know that the voting rights, the act that they fought for 50 years ago is being compromised right now in this country today. We know that right now the struggle for freedom and justice is real. We live in the most incarcerated country in the world. There are more black men under correctional control today than were under slavery in 1850. When people are marching with our song, we want to tell you that we are with you, we see you, we love you, and march on." 20.

As Canadians we might think these issues are uniquely American, but the Hamilton Clergy who travelled to Selma 50 years ago saw the parallels with Canadian's relationship with their aboriginal peoples. And Harper's Fair Elections Act is riddled with ways to ensure voter suppression.

Let's make sure we march forward instead of backward and continue to be inspired by the sacrifices made on the Edmund Pettus Bridge 50 years ago and be the better human beings we know we can be and keep fighting for justice.

FOOTNOTES

1. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selma_to_Montgomery_marches

2. John Lewis, Walking With The Wind: A Memoir of The Movement (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998) 337-340.

3. Ibid., p. 340-341.
4. Ibid., p. 342.
5. Ibid., p. 344.
6. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selma_to_Montgomery_marches
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. James M. Washington (Ed.), I Have A Dream: Writings And Speeches That Changed The World (New York: Harper Collins, 1992) 124.
10. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selma_to_Montgomery_marches
11. <http://www.uulivinglegacy.org/marching-in-the-arc.html>
12. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HBfZoWHjo2k>
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15. <http://www.thespec.com/opinion-story/5516347-mahoney-a-tale-of-two-selmas-50-years-apart/>
16. <https://www.facebook.com/groups/202303769881405/>
17. Mark D. Morrison-Reed, The Selma Awakening: How The Civil Rights Movement Tested And Changed Unitarian Universalism (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2014) 146.
18. Ibid., p. 123.
19. <http://www.bustle.com/articles/65840-transcript-of-john-legend-commons-oscar-acceptance-speech-proves-glory-has-a-timeless-message-video>
20. Ibid.