

HAMILTON'S ANTI-RACISM JOURNEY: From Selma to Black Lives Matter
Lyla Miklos

YOU TUBE VIDEO: Lyla crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama in 2015 (1 min and 2 seconds) From: Lyla Miklos. Posted: March 9, 2015.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFVSkTPwNzc>

LYLA: I recorded that video 5 years ago when I took part in the Unitarian Universalist Association's Marching In The Arc of Justice Conference. ¹

Unitarian Universalists or UU's have a deep connection to the events that took place in Selma in 1965. Two of the martyrs of the movement – James Reeb ² , a Minister & Viola Liuzzo ³ , a member – were UUs. They both came to Selma to show their solidarity.

When Rev. Reeb was murdered it was a catalyst for action not just for UU Church Leaders, like The First Unitarian Church of Hamilton's Rev. Hemstreet and the Mississauga Unitarian Congregation's Rev. Arnold Thaw, but for Faith Leaders across North America, like Beth Jacob Synagogue's Rabbi Eugene Weiner, Eastwood Baptist Church's Rev. Allan Matthews, McMaster University's Chaplain Rev. Edwin Heaven, Stewart Memorial Church's Rev. Francis Legge, St. Andrew's United Church's Rev. Gerald Elliott and Burlington's St. Elizabeth's Anglican Church's Rev. Frederick Etherden. ⁴

They embodied the words of King's 1966 UUA Ware Lecture: *"The church has a great responsibility, because when the church is true to its nature, it stands as a moral guardian of the community and of the society. It has always been the role of the church to broaden horizons, to challenge the status quo, and to question and break mores if necessary."*⁵

At the 2015 conference I attend the BIG QUESTION was what were UUs doing to dismantle racism now?

Two years before Selma, in 1963, the Rev. King wrote in his famous Letter From A Birmingham Jail:

*"Over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Councilor or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: 'I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action'; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a 'more convenient season.'"*⁶

Rev. King said this over 50 years ago, web commentator “Lily White Mama” said this in 2015:

“The problem is what happened after the Civil Rights Movement. Safe in their conviction that they were Good White People, our parents and grandparents returned to the safe bosom of white privilege. Many of them went back to their white lives having, in their opinion, done their part to end racism. They taught us really important things that their parents may not have taught them: we were taught not to hate people because of their race, not believe that any race was inferior and not to discriminate against people because of their race. They taught us how to be Good White People, and they never realized (or not until too late) that they were being tricked or, at the very least, naïve—that racism was far more complex and devious than they understood. You see, if racism in this country were only a matter of white people being mean and consciously believing people to be inferior, I truly believe it would’ve ended long ago.” ⁷

In 1965 it was the video images on the nightly news of white Alabama police beating peaceful Black marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge which horrified and disgusted Americans into being shamed into action. ⁸

In 1991 when I was in High School it was the video of a Black Man named Rodney King being brutally beaten by white Los Angeles Police Officers. ⁹

In 2020 now that every person has a video camera in their back pocket and multiple social media platforms to be able to broadcast from we have been bombarded with images of police brutality against Black people. The murder of George Floyd by Police in the middle of a Worldwide Pandemic finally forced everyone to no longer ignore and tune out the violence. ¹⁰

We like to believe that we know better now. But do we?

In 1962 James Baldwin shared these words in his book “The Fire Next Time”:

“There is simply no possibility of a real change in the Negro’s situation without the most radical and far-reaching changes in the American political and social structure. And it is clear that white Americans are not simply willing to effect these changes: they are, in the main, so slothful have they become, unable even to envision them. It must be added that the Negro himself no longer believes in the good faith of white Americans – if, indeed, he ever could have ...

... the country speaks of a “new” Negro, which it has been doing ever hour on the hour for decades, it is not really referring to a change in the Negro, which, in any case, it is quite incapable of assessing, but only to a new difficulty in keeping him in his place ... Consequently, white Americans are in nothing more deluded than in supposing that Negroes could ever have imagined that white people would “give” them anything. It is rare indeed that people give. Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and they assume themselves to be. One can give nothing whatever without giving oneself – that is to say, risking oneself ... If one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving. And after all, one can give freedom only by setting someone free.” ^{11.}

Baldwin’s words remind me of what Beth Jacob Synagogue’s former Rabbi Selsberg said when he invited Romana and I to his home for Passover Seder:

“God doesn’t want us to be oppressed. God doesn’t want any Pharaohs. God wants us to be free.” ^{12.}

For many years I would refer to myself as an anti-racist activist. I always thought of myself as a “good person” when it came to matters of race, but I soon became aware that I was part of a system that continued to perpetuate the racism I claimed to be fighting against. It’s easy enough to blame “the system”, but where was my personal responsibility in all of this? In my 45 years so far I admit with shame that I have said some horribly racist things. I have used ugly words. Sometimes to people who I considered friends. Even worse than the things that came out of my mouth were the conversations I had with myself in my own head.

So am I an anti-racist activist?

My friend, Dr. Ismael Traore, once wrote:

“White people cannot call themselves anti-racists. At best they can call themselves Recovering Racists.”^{13.}

Taking his analogy further I would have to look at Racism like Alcoholism. As a white woman I would have to assume first that I am a racist and secondly that I will always be a racist. It will be a demon I would have to continually wrestle with.

In the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous the 5th step is *“Admitting to God, to ourselves and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.”* ^{14.}

In Unitarian Universalism we don't subscribe to the idea of sin, but as a White Woman I suddenly realized that I have been a sinner. I too bore my own Scarlet Letter. An R for Racist.

Ismael and I had another provocative conversation when I showed him pictures on my iPhone from my trip to Alabama while we enjoyed drinks on a patio before attending a spoken word competition. He asked me if I considered myself a member of the White Race. His question made me feel ill. White Race? That phrase conjures up images of Neo-Nazi rallies and KKK members with confederate flags. Ew! But I guess he had a point. I am a member of the white race and I needed to take ownership for everything that implied.

By not identifying myself as white I was saying in essence that the only people who can identify with a race are people of colour. White is the default mode, anything other than white needed a qualifier. Or as Toni Morrison once said, *“In this country American means white, everyone else has to hyphenate.”* ^{15.}

Black people encounter racism from well-meaning white liberals such as myself in the form of micro-aggressions. There was a good list of these assembled by the Baltimore Racial Justice Action called Stupid Things White People Say to Black People. Their list was fairly exhaustive so I will highlight the top ten: ¹⁶.

- 1. Saying “one of my best friends is Black, Asian, Latino, Indigenous . . . etc.”*
- 2. Saying that if anyone works hard they will get ahead.*
- 3. Saying that you “don’t see color.”*
- 4. Lecturing BIPOC or Black, Indigenous and People of Colour on how they need to let go of the past.*
- 5. Excusing yourself from responsibility for racism because you weren’t born yet when people were enslaved.*
- 6. Getting offended when you feel you’ve been perceived as a racist.*
- 7. Believing that identifying yourself as a progressive, liberal, anarchist, and/or a spiritual person guarantees you are anti-racist.*

8. Believing that because you have experienced oppression as a woman, Jew, person with a disability, LGBT, etc. that you understand racism.

9. Believing that racism “goes both ways.”

10. Believing the “stamp of approval” from a few people of color means you are anti-racist.

In Canada we tend to look down at Americans and have a somewhat over-inflated sense of superiority when it comes to matters of race.

In the introduction to Desmond Cole’s book *The Skin We’re In: A Year of Black Resistance and Power* he shared these words:

“I kept track of the violence done to Black people in my city, Toronto, and my country, Canada, as if it was being done to me, because it was, because it is, because that’s what Black people are facing in Canada and around the world, and I’d never been more aware of it.

Fifteen year old activist Michelle Erin Hopkins said: “People who refuse to acknowledge the fact that Canada has its race problems compare us a lot to Americans. They say, ‘Canada’s not like America. Why are you crossing borders? But that’s the thing –

Black lives have no borders. We exist everywhere regardless of the fact they may not want us to.”

The year was full of painful reminders that Black people are not wanted in Canada, that this is a land stolen from Indigenous Peoples and ultimately colonized, just like my parents’ native land of Sierre Leone – by white British Settlers.

We could choose any year since the Confederation of Canada in 1867 to illustrate how white supremacy functions here. But the struggle for Black life in modern-day Canada is a living struggle, as urgent today as it has ever been. ¹⁷.

When we look at protests across the planet right now in support of Black Lives Matter they come from that same sense of urgency that Beth Jacob Synagogue’s Rabbi Weiner and The First Unitarian Church of Hamilton’s Rev. Hemstreet had in 1965.

One of the co-founders of the Black Lives Matter, Alicia Garza, said:

“When we say Black Lives Matter, we are talking about the ways in which Black people are deprived of our basic human rights and dignity. Black Lives Matter doesn’t mean your life isn’t important—it means that Black lives, which are seen as without value within White supremacy ...

... are important to your liberation. When we are able to end hyper-criminalization and sexualization of Black people and end the poverty, control, and surveillance of Black people, every single person in this world has a better shot at getting and staying free. When Black people get free, everybody gets free.” ^{18.}

Over the past few weeks here in Hamilton there have been several different Black Lives Matter Marches and Rallies and just a few days ago artists took over Main Street in front of Hamilton City Hall while the Hamilton Police Services Board Meeting was underway and painted the words DEFUND THE POLICE on to the road in giant yellow letters. ^{19.}

So what connects these threads: Selma to Black Lives Matter to Defund The Police.

In a piece that Hamilton’s Ryan McGreal wrote for Raise The Hammer he said:

“In Hamilton our police budget is \$171 million, the single biggest line item in the entire municipal budget. The police budget is also higher than all of our social service programs - combined.

Pouring so much money into policing does two things, both harmful. (1) It starves social programs that would prevent a lot of police calls if they were properly funded; and (2) It forces the police into social service roles they're not trained or qualified to do.

This hurts vulnerable communities twice: first, by depriving them of the basic resources they need to survive and flourish, and again by applying punitive force against the predictable crises that result from the lack of resources.

So when you hear someone saying, "defund the police", don't dismiss it as utopian nonsense. If you have not experienced the sharp end of the racial discrimination stick, it is incumbent on you to listen to people who have experienced it. The status quo cannot continue." ²⁰.

Another Keynote Speaker from the Conference I attended in Alabama was The Rev. Dr. William J. Barber The II. On June 14th of this year he gave the virtual sermon from an empty Washington National Cathedral and said:

“Blacks are 2.4 times as likely to die from COVID-19 than whites. Not because they’re black, but because of the systemic racism that denies healthcare and denies, clean air and clean water.

If this nation wants to live, we must let justice roll down like waters and righteousness, like a mighty stream. That’s the answer to living rather than dying – justice. When policies and actions are rooted in justice, they bring life. Justice is the antithesis of deadly policies – justice, and love woven together. That’s the answer. That’s the antibiotic for all of this death.

Martin Luther King and Rabbi Heschel, they all got together with Rosa Parks and they marched together and they built a civil rights campaign. And it came through like rushing water. It might look like death is winning. When we watch a police officer choke the life out of a fellow human on TV, or when we see someone shot in the back or when we see white supremacy emboldened by the actions all the way from the top of our government, but I see something else happening.

The only way we're going to do it, the only way we're going to move this history of death and continuation of death is to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness, like a mighty stream. I heard a poet, William Whitla, say it like this:" ^{21.}

*Let streams of living justice flow down upon the earth.
Give freedom's light to captives; let all the poor have worth.
The hungry's hands are pleading; the workers claim their rights,
The mourners long for laughter, the blinded seek for sight.
Make liberty a beacon, strike down the iron power.
Abolish ancient vengeance. Proclaim your people's hour.* ^{22.}

I talked earlier about how Racism is akin to Alcoholism and shared one of the steps from Alcoholic Anonymous. The final and 12th Step of AA is: *"Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we try to carry this message to alcoholics and to practice these principles in all our affairs."* ^{23.}

Earlier I shared a list of stupid things white people say to black people. Here is a list of 10 Simple Ways White People Can Step Up To Fight Everyday racism. ^{24.}

- 1. Listen when BIPOC or Black, Indigenous and People of Colour talk about everyday racism and white privilege.*

2. Honor the feelings of BIPOC people in the discussion. It is not about your white guilt.
3. Ask plenty of questions. Earnestly seek to understand BIPOC people before trying to have your viewpoint understood.
4. Educate yourself about racism as much as possible before asking BIPOC people for help.
5. Challenge other white people in your life to think critically about racism — family, friends, coworkers, teachers and even public officials.
6. Direct peers towards the perspectives of BIPOC people. Becoming a "white savior" is not cool.
7. Avoid conflating other oppressions with racism unless it's directly relevant to the conversation.
8. If you make a mistake, ask BIPOC people how you can fix it.
9. Adopt intersectionality as an approach to all aspects of everyday life and start taking it seriously.
10. Openly call out and reject any and all white privilege you witness or experience.

Two Civil Rights legends, CT Vivian and John Lewis, recently passed away. Today Congressman Lewis's body travelled one last time from Selma to Montgomery before being laid in state. ²⁵.

Rev Barber said: *“Imagine if we had really listened to Martin and John Lewis and C.T. Vivian and Rosa Parks. Instead what we've had is a compassion deficit. We've not listened fully to the prophets God has sent us, and that's dangerous for a nation. If we were moved with compassion as a nation, next week we could pass healthcare for all, then the next week we could pass living wages for all, & the next week we could restore voting rights for all. We could feed the hungry & house the homeless if we were moved with compassion!”* ²⁶.

In July 2015 John Lewis attended San Diego Comic Con to promote his graphic autobiography March. He decided to truly get into the spirit of things by cos-playing as himself by wearing the same attire he wore when he crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965. Dozens of children joined him in recreating that march.

Mick Rabin who brought his students to hear Lewis at Comic Con after they studied March in his classroom said:

“People incorrectly underestimate the ‘readiness’ that young students have for complex subjects like civil rights or LGBT safety and inclusion. But that’s patronizing. They can handle it. It just takes a bit more time, effort and front loading. Third-graders can really relate to social justice, because nobody in the world comprehends the idea of what is ‘fair’ better than an 8-year old. And ‘fairness’ is just another way of saying ‘social justice’. Kids can and really do get it.” ²⁷.

I’m ending my talk with a video that Sesame Street and CNN collaborated on, so when you feel like trying to end racism is impossible you can remember these words from Elmo and their Dad.

YOU TUBE VIDEO: Elmo and his dad talk about racism on Sesame Street (2 minutes and 19 seconds) From: Sterling Pound. Posted: June 7, 2020.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILvJ2vX-kcc&feature=youtu.be>

Sources:

1. <http://www.uulivinglegacy.org/marching-in-the-arc.html>
2. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Reeb
3. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Viola_Liuzzo
4. Frank Adams, “Clerics Back From Selma Turn To Canadian Issues,” The Globe & Mail, 18 March 1965, Page 2

“Clergy Back From Selma Honoured At City Receptlon,” The Hamilton Spectator, 18 March 1965, Page R5
5. Witnessing For The Truth: Martin Luther King Jr., Unitarian Universalism, and Beacon Press. Boston: Beacon Press, 2014. 21.

6. James M. Washington, ed., I Have A Dream: Writings And Speeches That Changed The World. (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1992) 91.
7. “Please Stop Being A Good White Person”, 2015, Lily White Mama’s Guide To Being Racist, 9 June 2015. <http://lilywhitemama.com/a-piece-of-the-puzzle/>
8. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Selma_to_Montgomery_marches#%22Bloody_Sunday%22_events
9. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rodney_King
10. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Floyd
11. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Random House, 1962) 85-86.
12. <http://www.lylamiklos.com/PressReleases/SelmalsNow.pdf>
13. Ismael Traore as Samir Ismael. Facebook. July 8, 2015.
14. <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/About-AA/The-12-Steps-of-AA>
15. https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Toni_Morrison (The Guardian, 29 January 1992)
16. “29 Stupid Things White People Do And What We Can Do Instead”, 2014, Baltimore Racial Justice Action, <http://bmoreantiracist.org/white-people/29-stupid-things-white-people-do-and-what-we-can-do-instead/>
17. Desmond Cole, *The Skin We’re In: A Year Of Black Resistance And Power* (Canada: Penguin Random House Doubleday Canada, 2020) 2-3
18. Alicia Garza, “A Herstory of the #BlackLivesMatter Movement,” 7 October 2014, The Feminist Wire, <http://www.thefeministwire.com/2014/10/blacklivesmatter-2/>
19. Bobby Hristova & Samantha Craggs, “Hamilton police investigating 'defund the police' painting on Main Street”, 23 July 2020, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hamilton/defund-the-police-painting-main-street-hamilton-1.5660701>
- Kate McCullough, Teviah Moro & Sebastian Bron, “Defund the police strikes outside Hamilton City Hall”, 23 July 2020, <https://www.thespec.com/news/hamilton-region/2020/07/23/defund-the-police-painted-outside-city-hall-as-activists-gather-peacefully-ahead-of-police-board-meeting.html>
20. Ryan McGreal, “Don't Be So Quick to Dismiss the 'Defund the Police' Argument”, 4 June 2020, https://www.raisethehammer.org/article/3766/dont_be_so_quick_to_dismiss_the_defund_the_police_argument
21. <https://cathedral.org/sermons/sermon-the-rev-dr-william-j-barber-ii-2/>

22. <https://english.duke.edu/news/poem-day-streams-living-justice>

23. <http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/About-AA/The-12-Steps-of-AA>

24. Clifton, Derrick. "10 Simple Ways White People Can Step Up To End Everyday Racism." *Identities.Mic*. 4 September 2014. <http://mic.com/articles/97900/10-simple-rules-for-being-a-non-racist-white-person>

25. Brad Harper. "John Lewis' procession to follow Selma to Montgomery route, to be honored at Alabama Capitol." *Montgomery Advertiser*. 22 July 2020. <https://www.montgomeryadvertiser.com/story/news/2020/07/23/john-lewis-procession-selma-montgomery-route-viewing-alabama-capitol-troy-university/5498778002/>

26. <https://twitter.com/RevDrBarber/status/1286994104111505409?s=20>

<https://twitter.com/RevDrBarber/status/1286994256595492865?s=20>

27. Michael Cavanaugh. "The real origin story behind how Rep. John Lewis became THE hit of Comic-Con." *The Washington Post*, 13 Jul 2015. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/comic-riffs/wp/2015/07/13/the-real-origin-story-behind-how-rep-john-lewis-became-the-hit-of-comic-con/>