

“A Civil Rights Journey”

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Last week I had the phenomenal opportunity to travel to the deep South in the company of 30 others, most of us Unitarian Universalists. Our mission was to visit sites from the Civil Rights Movement all over the South, to meet and talk with people who had lived through those days, to stand on the sacred ground where so many people had put their bodies and their very lives on the line for freedom—to make some kind of sense of what had happened there and what was happening right now.

For some of us, the tour was a chance to revisit old memories. Some remembered the Movement days from when they were young people; some had even been there on the front lines, like our tour leader, the Rev. Gordon Gibson. He'd spent a week in jail in Selma, Alabama around the time of the march to Montgomery.

Others, like me, were born later. For us, this was a priceless chance to actually touch and see and breathe in a part of history that until then had only existed in textbooks.

We met up in Chicago at my seminary, Meadville Lombard Theological School. We loaded our suitcases onto the bus, along with granola bars and pillows and mugs of coffee, and we headed south.

Within an hour we had left behind the snow in Chicago.
(I'm still shaking my head that I had to bring snow boots
on a trip to Mississippi!)
The grass got greener as we went.
We started to see buds on the trees.
By the time we got to Memphis, we were back into springtime.

But it was hard, knowing where we were and why we had come here.
On Easter Sunday we saw the church where Martin Luther King
preached his last sermon in 1968.
It was on April 3, and he was in Memphis
helping to build up support for a garbage workers' strike.
That night it was pouring rain, and he was worn out.
He'd been getting a lot of death threats.
He was really tired.
But he made it to the mass meeting at the Mason Temple
and preached his way through his fears and his exhaustion.
He told the crowd
he was so glad he had been born into this time in history.
Maybe you remember—he told them,

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place.
But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will.
And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked
over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with
you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to
the promised land!

And he said:

I'm happy, tonight.
I'm not worried about anything.
I'm not fearing any man!¹

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., speech delivered 3 April 1968, Mason Temple (Church of God in Christ Headquarters), Memphis, Tennessee.

The next day he was murdered,
shot to death on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel.
And it's a sobering thing, to think of that.
Me, I think he knew.
I am not a superstitious person. But I think he knew.
It's a sobering thing,
to stand on that spot where our nation's heart was broken in an instant.

Today the Lorraine Motel is the home of the National Civil Rights
Museum. They've done a wonderful job of transforming this site
into a place of dignity and learning and respect.
The museum honors Dr. King, of course,
and also the many others who were no less heroic.
In Memphis, we on the tour began to hear the stories
of ordinary people,
people whose life story is not so well known,
but whose courage was breathtaking.

We heard the story of a teenage girl who was at the Highlander Folk
School in the 1950s when sheriffs' deputies raided the school.
The Highlander Folk School in Tennessee
was a pioneer in interracial organizing and training.
Blacks and whites went there to learn about nonviolence and organizing
and strategy, together, which was just about unheard-of in those days.
Rosa Parks had been there just a few months before the famous
Montgomery bus boycott.
Pete Seeger went there and learned a song
that became the anthem of the Movement: "We Shall Overcome."

And one night, a young African-American girl,
no more than 14 years old,
defied a whole gang of racists with that song.

She was at an evening class at the school with lots of other activists when all of a sudden the classroom went dark.

A bunch of sheriff's deputies had shown up and cut the lights.

She could hear some of them in the building next door, rifling through people's luggage, cussing, threatening.

Some of them stood guard outside the classroom door.

Anything could happen.

It was terrifying, waiting there in that dark room.

And this young girl began to sing.

"We shall overcome," she sang, softly at first.

Others joined in.

And then she sang out loud with a new verse:

"We are not afraid today!

Deep in my heart, I do believe, we are not afraid today!"

The song swelled as her companions took up the verse.

One of the deputies came up to her—

she could dimly see his face, nervous-looking, scared—
he was scared!

He said in a shaky voice, "Do you have to sing so loud?"

And she sang out even louder!

No one was hurt that night, not one single soul.²

Of course our tour group was reminded, as we went further south into Mississippi and Alabama, that was not always the case.

As we traveled, we were mindful of the Freedom Riders who boarded interstate buses in 1961, black and white together, and rode through Alabama and Mississippi.

One of their buses was burned in Anniston, Alabama.

They were badly beaten in Birmingham and Montgomery.

Over 300 of the Freedom Riders were arrested in Jackson, Mississippi

² *We Shall Overcome* [videorecording] (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1989).

and served up to two months of jail time.
But they kept getting back on the buses.
Before they set out, they made their wills.
They knew they might be killed.
But they kept getting on the buses.
They were willing to die so that white racists would know
violence could not stop them.

Imagine that courage—that breathtaking courage,
ready to risk everything for freedom and justice.
As we traveled on our own bus,
black and white people traveling together,
what could we do but give our profound thanks
to those who had come before?

In Marion, Alabama, we visited the historically black
Zion United Methodist Church,
where marchers organized on the night of February 18, 1965
to support one of the Movement leaders, James Orange,
who had been jailed down the street.
We heard members of the church recall
how state troopers shot out the streetlights,
surrounded the church,
and systematically beat the marchers as they emerged.
We stood on the spot where an unarmed young black man,
Jimmie Lee Jackson,
was shot and killed
for trying to protect his grandfather from the beatings.

We traveled to Selma and marked the spot
where the Unitarian Universalist minister James Reeb
was clubbed to death by white racists.
We walked across the Edmund Pettus Bridge,
where state troopers and deputies beat and tear-gassed
hundreds of marchers.

Later we drove to the site where UU laywoman Viola Liuzzo was shot in the head by Klansmen along a lonely stretch of road. Her only crime was driving marchers back from Montgomery to Selma. So much violence, so much hatred, so much death.

Yet we also witnessed stories of hope and triumph that were something to behold. I know some of you remember the murder of three civil rights workers at the beginning of Freedom Summer in 1964 in Mississippi. James Chaney, a black man from Meridian, Mississippi and Mickey Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, two white men from New York, had been working to start up a Freedom School for black children in Neshoba County, Mississippi. Mount Zion United Methodist Church had agreed to host it. The three men had gone back to Ohio for more training

But one night, the Klan came looking for the three men. When they found out they weren't around, they beat up any church members they could find and burned down the church. They figured that would bring Chaney and Schwerner and Goodman back in a hurry. And they were right. All three men returned. On June 21, 1964, they were arrested for speeding—a common pretext in those days. They were held in jail just long enough for the Klan to set up an ambush. At 10:30 that night, they were released from jail. And if you were released from jail without anyone there to pick you up, late at night, you really don't want to go. But they had no choice. They set out in their car, and they disappeared.

Their bodies were found six weeks later.

The picture on the cover of your order of service is one artist's vision of their final moments.

The artist is Norman Rockwell—*the* Norman Rockwell.

It is not a perfect image—

today we question why Mickey Schwerner, the white man, is shown holding up James Chaney—

but it is a powerful image.

Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman were murdered in 1964.

For forty years there was no justice for them or their families.

Everyone in the community knew who had killed them, but no one was talking.

No one would go on record to say a word about it.

But in 2004 something changed.

A young man named Leroy Clemens had become president of his local branch of the NAACP,

and he decided, this fortieth anniversary of the murders *cannot* pass without the community's doing *something*.

He put together a coalition of community leaders, regular people, whites, blacks, Native Americans, anyone who wanted to be involved, to do three things:

First, acknowledge that the community had allowed these murders to happen and had done nothing about it.

Second, apologize to the families of the murdered men as a community.

Third, to ask the authorities for justice.

And this they did.³

In January 2005 Edgar Ray Killen was indicted.

He was the guy who organized the whole plot, an ordained minister, I might add.

He'd been acquitted in 1967 because one lady on the jury "couldn't bring herself to convict a preacher."

³ Leroy Clemons, personal communication, March 25, 2008.

Now, after a lot of legal ups and downs,
41 years to the day of the murders,
Edgar Ray Killen was convicted of manslaughter.
He is currently serving a 60-year sentence in prison.

I'd like to share with you a postscript to this story as well.
Our tour group went to visit James Chaney's grave,
which lies in a very beautiful, quiet rural cemetery off a country road.
Almost just a field, really, no fancy sculptures, no fences,
just trees growing up around the graves, protecting them, it seemed,
and birds singing.
It was so pretty.
A strange thought came to me—
if you have to be dead, this is a good place to be dead.
It felt so calm.

And there waiting for us was a lovely young woman,
African-American—I wondered if she was a member
of one of the churches we had been visiting.
But no: her name was Angela Lewis,
and she was James Chaney's daughter,
born ten days before her father was murdered.
He never got to meet her.

She talked to us for a few minutes about her life,
the connection she felt to her father,
through hearing her family's stories about him.
She said, "I feel I am very like him."
And though she has walked through anger and sorrow,
she feels blessed in her life now.
She has a beautiful family and work she enjoys.
She told us she prays often for the men who killed her father—
she prays for them and for the well-being of their spirit.⁴

⁴ Angela Lewis, personal communication, March 25, 2008.

And I can only say:
Blessed be this daughter of tragedy
whose spirit of love and charity shines through so strong.

Blessed be all who had the courage and the vision
to risk everything for their freedom,
and the freedom of their children.

Blessed be all who have carried the vision forward,
faithful to the call that beckons them onward.

Blessed be we who have the gift of life today,
and the will to be makers of justice and peace
in this time and this place,
trusting as our ancestors did
that the arc of the universe is long,
but it bends toward justice.
This is our strength and our hope.
May we never let it die.

Amen.