



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

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## “Singing to Selma”

© by Myrna Adams West and Herb West, Lay Ministers

A sermon delivered on March 8, 2015

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

The freedom songs are playing a strong and vital role in our struggle. They give the people new courage and a sense of unity. *Martin Luther King, Jr.*

Singing provided an outlet of protest for those who might normally have been intimidated by racist authority or mobs, and allowed those outside the struggle to become directly engaged.

*Smithsonian Folkways*

Singing is running this sound through your body. You cannot sing a song and not change your condition. *Bernice Johnson Reagon*, SNCC Freedom Singer and founder of ‘Sweet Honey in the Rock’

### Sermon

#### Herb

*Intro to Gathering Songs:* As we gather for this morning’s worship service, let us begin with two familiar folk songs which became part of the Civil Rights movement in the 50’s and 60’s, primarily thanks to Peter, Paul, and Mary who performed them at the August 1963 March On Washington as well as during the march from Selma to Montgomery 50 years ago this month. Bob Dylan wrote “Blowin’ in the Wind” in 1962, adapting the melody from an old African-American spiritual, “No More Auction Block.” It soon became an anthem of the Civil Rights movement. Mavis Staples, of the famous Staples Singers, expressed her astonishment on first hearing the song, and said she could not understand how a young white man could write something which captured the frustration and aspirations of black people so powerfully. The song later became part of the anti-Vietnam war movement and many other freedom and rights movements, has been covered by many different artists, and, somewhat unfortunately, remains just as relevant today as it did 50 years ago. “If I Had a Hammer” was written by Pete Seeger and Lee Hays of the famous folk music quartet, The Weavers, in 1949 in support of the progressive movement and workers rights. This song, too, was adopted by the Civil Rights movement in the 1960’s.

Songs: “Blowin’ in the Wind” & “If I Had a Hammer”

## Myrna

*Welcome:* Good morning! On this day when thousands from around the world are gathering in Selma, Alabama, to re-enact the historic march across the Edmond Pettus Bridge, the march that became known as Bloody Sunday, the march that helped to convince President Lyndon Johnson to push Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act, we welcome you to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA. We welcome you no matter your race, color, creed, national origin, gender, partner preference, political preference, or any other preference or characteristic. This congregation has its own historic connection to the struggle for Civil Rights through one of our founders, Horace Montgomery. In 1961 Dr. Montgomery led the University of Georgia faculty to take a stand in support of readmitting to the university Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes, the courageous students who integrated UGA. We also have a member, present with us this morning, who was in Selma for the historic march. Bettina Rose Hughes was among those who marched for justice in Alabama 50 years ago. Let us show our appreciation of her courage with a round of applause in her honor.

At this moment, our minister, the Rev. Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, and more than 50 members and friends of this congregation, plus members of Bethel Baptist Church in Watkinsville, one of our partners in ministry, are in Selma joining Unitarian Universalist Association President Peter Morales, UUA Moderator Jim Key and thousands of others in every shade of the human rainbow as they prepare to march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, singing once more “We Shall Overcome.”

As Herb lights our chalice this morning let us honor Bettina Rose Hughes and the participants in today’s march, as we also remember Horace Montgomery and other local Civil Rights leaders, and remember especially those killed in the marches in 1965—Jimmy Lee Jackson; UU Minister, the Rev. James Reeb; and UU activist Viola Liuzzo—as well as others who were martyred for Civil Rights, including the four girls killed in the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, 14-year-old Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley and Carole Robertson and 11-year-old Denise McNair. We remember also President John F. Kennedy; Medgar Evers; Robert F. Kennedy; Malcolm X; Martin Luther King, Jr.; and Mrs. Alberta King.

## Myrna

*Together Time:* Raise your hand if you like to sing? Raise your hand if you like to sing by yourself. Raise your hand if you like to sing with others? Does it make you feel good when you sing? I love to sing!! I’ve been singing since I was old enough to talk. I like to sing by myself. I like to sing with others. I just love to sing! When I sing, it makes me feel good. Singing is one way of making music. There’s a really old saying that says, “Musick has Charms to sooth a savage Beast.” That means that even when you feel unhappy or sad or mad, music can make you feel better. That’s one way that we use music here at UUFA. We sing or listen to the pianist or some other musician play an instrument, and we feel better. One of the songs that makes me feel really good is “This Little Light of Mine.” It was written almost 100 years ago. It says even if all we have is one tiny light, like one tiny candle, if we all stand together and let our lights shine, then we can make one great big light. About 60 years ago when African Americans were marching and working and singing about not getting to vote even though they had the legal right to vote, they sang this song a lot. It helped them remember how important it is to work together, especially when some other people try to hurt us or keep us from doing what we know is right and what we

have a right to do. I like the way this song sounds. I like the meaning of it. And I like the way it makes me feel when we all sing it together. Will you sing it with me now? Let's sing some verses together before you go to your activities, and then we'll sing some other verses as you leave.

Song: "This Little Light of Mine"

### Herb

*Introduction to Service & Commentary on Anthem:* Music and singing played a crucial role in inspiring, mobilizing, and giving voice to the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "The freedom songs are playing a strong and vital role in our struggle. They give the people new courage and a sense of unity. I think they keep faith alive, a radiant hope in the future, particularly in our most trying hours." In his 1964 book, *Why We Can't Wait*, King writes that the civil rights activists "sing the freedom songs today for the same reason the slaves sang them, because we too are in bondage and the songs add hope to our determination that 'We shall overcome, black and white together, we shall overcome someday.'" (p. 86) Civil rights activists sang songs at marches and at rallies, on buses en route to those marches and rallies, and in prison cells after having been arrested. Singing together in a group reminded people that they were not alone. Singing songs at marches and rallies stirred people up. Singing in prisons after being arrested helped keep their spirits up. Songs captured collective memories of events, and recalled similar struggles by those in the past. Some of the songs arose out of the African-American spiritual experience, relying on the typical call-and-response style that helped create community, and evoking the religious foundation of the civil rights struggle. In this morning's service, we are exploring some of the songs of the civil rights movement and what their role was in the movement as well as what their contributions were to the movement. We began the service with two popular folk songs, as well as a gospel children's song, which became part of the civil rights movement. We will continue with other songs. The song, "People Get Ready," was written in 1964 by the singer-songwriter and musician, Curtis Lee Mayfield, in response to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I Have a Dream" speech at the 1963 March On Washington. According to NPR's Juan Williams, "For many, it captured the spirit of the march — the song reaches across racial and religious lines to offer a message of redemption and forgiveness. The train that is coming in the song speaks to a chance for redemption — the long-sought chance to rise above racism, to stand apart from despair and any desire for retaliation — an end to the cycle of pain." The song became one of Martin Luther King's favorites and was a standard used in demonstrations during the civil rights struggles in the 1960's. It was initially made famous in 1965 by Mayfield's group, The Impressions, and later recorded by many others. Bob Marley used some of the lyrics and melody in his reggae song, "One Love." Now, the train is a-coming, so people, let's get on board and get ready!

Choir: "People Get Ready"

### Herb

*Commentary on Anthem* A day after the brutal attack on the marchers in Selma on "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., said: "*In the vicious maltreatment of defenseless citizens of Selma, where old women and young children were gassed and clubbed at random, we have witnessed an eruption of the disease of racism which seeks to destroy all*

*America. No American is without responsibility. The people of Selma will struggle on for the soul of the nation but it is fitting that all Americans help to bear the burden. I call therefore on clergy of all faiths to join me in Selma”.*

The Federal Court issued a restraining order prohibiting a planned march to the State Capitol of Montgomery. But with 2,000-3,000 people of all races waiting to march, Dr. King made a decision to go ahead in defiance of the Federal Court order. As they marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 9, the marchers sang “Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Round,” a traditional African-American spiritual, to which they added verses appropriate to the situation. Alabama state troopers once again met the marchers when they reached the bottom of the bridge. But this time, the marchers dropped to their knees and prayed. After praying, they rose and returned to Brown Chapel AME Church, avoiding another potentially violent confrontation with state troopers and refraining from violating the court order. This march became known as Turnaround Tuesday. Later that night, Unitarian Universalist minister, James Reeb, who had responded to King’s call to come to Selma, was brutally murdered by members of the KKK. A week later, responding to increasing national outrage, President Lyndon Johnson urged Congress to pass the voting rights act, which was eventually adopted and signed in August. The Federal Court also granted permission for the Selma-to-Montgomery march which began March 21 with over 3,500 people, and ended on March 25 at the state capitol with a crowd of supporters and marchers that had grown to 25,000 people. The marchers this time were successful in not allowing anyone to turn them around!

Choir: “*Ain’t Gonna Let Nobody*”

### Myrna

*Spoken Meditation & Commentary on “Precious Lord”:* During Together Time, I quoted a line from William Congreve’s 1697 play, *The Mourning Bride*. *The line has been quoted and misquoted many times, but its meaning is no less true today than it was more than 300 years ago:* “Music has charms to soothe a savage breast.” Music has many charms. As a lullaby it can put a cranky child to sleep. As a march it can lead an army into battle. As a love song it can win the heart of the most recalcitrant lover. As a prayer it can calm the most turbulent soul. If you have seen the movie *Selma*, you no doubt recall the scene which depicts one of Dr. King’s darkest moments. News of Bloody Sunday, the obstinacy of the President and Congress, the unrest in his own home, the sheer weariness of continuing in the face of so much opposition—all of these things and more are weighing heavily on him. He needs something—someone—to lift him from the depths of his despair. He telephones Mahalia Jackson, the beloved gospel singer who is his friend and supporter, and says simply, “I need to hear the Lord’s voice.” Mahalia Jackson’s deeply soulful voice, captured in the movie by Ledisi Young’s moving performance, softly resonates through the phone lines into Dr. King’s weary soul.

*(Pianist begins softly playing “Precious Lord.”)*

This hymn, reported to be one of Dr. King’s favorites, was written by singer and composer Thomas A. Dorsey at the time of his own deepest despair. Dorsey, a well-known musician, was away from home at a performance when word came that his wife had died in childbirth. He rushed home in time to hold his newborn baby, but the infant soon died. Penning these prayerful words

helped Dorsey to make it through his despair. Because of this and other beautiful gospel hymns that he wrote, Dorsey became known as the Father of Gospel Music. Use of the word “Lord” sets some people’s teeth on edge, but people like Martin Luther King and Thomas Dorsey and Mahalia Jackson, descendants of slaves, did not hesitate to use this word or others like it. Notice that the adjective used to describe this “lord,” is “precious.” King and Dorsey and Jackson are not thinking of an “overlord” but of a friend who walks with them through the storms of life, someone who shares their burdens so that they can go on to do the hard work of social and political reform. If the word “lord” bothers you, perhaps you can lay aside your definition and think instead of someone who walks with you through the storms of your life. When we finish singing the hymn we will take a few moments of silent reflection.

Song: “Precious Lord” <*Silent Meditation*>

Myrna: Thankfully, most of us will never face the kinds of turbulence and terror that the courageous men and women faced on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, not once but three times in 1965. But whatever we face—about our own lives, families, jobs, health, physical and emotional challenges— that is turbulence enough.

### Herb

*Commentary on Hymn* Our closing hymn is unquestionably the most celebrated song of the Civil Rights Movement. This song originated from an earlier hymn, either “I’ll Overcome Someday” by the Rev. Charles Albert Tindley or “If My Jesus Wills” by Louise Shropshire. In either case, a version similar to what we will sing arose out of the Highlander Folk School near Monteagle, Tennessee. Highlander began in the 1930’s as a training school for the labor movement in Appalachia and throughout the South. In the 1950’s, it became involved in the Civil Rights Movement, training such activists as Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., Ralph David Abernathy, and John Lewis. Highlander music director, Zilphia Horton, learned this song from striking tobacco farm workers in South Carolina in 1946 and taught it to Pete Seeger, who published it shortly thereafter.

A later music director at Highlander, Guy Carawan, taught the song to those who organized the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, known as SNCC, in 1960. The song soon became the unofficial anthem of the Civil Rights Movement, as it was spread by folk singers such as Joan Baez, who sang it at the 1963 March On Washington, and Pete Seeger. President Johnson quoted it in his March 15, 1965 address to Congress calling for the voting rights act, which he delivered between the Turnaround Tuesday and the Selma-to-Montgomery marches. One of my most vivid memories is of playing my guitar and leading the singing of “We Shall Overcome” in the Chapel of my college during an impromptu memorial service following Martin Luther King’s assassination on April 4, 1968. Dr. King, in his final sermon just four days before his assassination, quoted from this song as well as from Theodore Parker, the Unitarian abolitionist minister who was his favorite theologian, when he said:

“We shall overcome. We shall overcome. Deep in my heart I do believe we shall overcome. And I believe it because somehow the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith, we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of

brotherhood. With this faith, we will be able to speed up the day. And in the words of prophecy, every valley shall be exalted. And every mountain and hill shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain and the crooked places straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. This will be a great day. This will be a marvelous hour. And at that moment—figuratively speaking in biblical words—the morning stars will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy.”

Song: “We Shall Overcome”

### Herb

*Closing Words*: We all know that while much progress has been made in the 50 years since the events in Selma and in the 47 years since King’s assassination, we still have a long way to go. Sometimes, it seems as if we are falling backwards, as recent events in Ferguson and New York City and elsewhere have indicated. But let us never lose hope, and let us never retreat from our work for social justice; for racial equality; for an end to discrimination against those of different races, different religions, different genders and sexual orientations; for an end to war; and for love and peace to reign throughout this country and the world. Let us keep on working, and let us keep on singing. Amen. Blessed Be. Peace. Salaam. Shalom.

Song: Reprise of “We Shall Overcome”

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. How did popular music reflect the values of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and help the movement convey its message?
2. What role does music play in your life?
3. Share your memories or your understanding of the Civil Rights Movement.
4. Share how the Civil Rights Movement has affected you personally.