



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “The View from the Bridge: Selma Reflections”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen, Hilda Kurtz and Jessica Fay

Three homilies delivered on April 12, 2015

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### Centering Thoughts

*Blessed are they who observe justice, who do righteousness at all times!* Psalm 106:3

*If the worst in American life lurked in [Selma's] dark streets, the best of American instincts arose passionately from across the nation to overcome it.* Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

*If we want to honor the courage of those who marched that day, then all of us are called to possess their moral imagination. All of us will need to feel, as they did, the fierce urgency of now.*  
President Barack Obama

### Three Reflections

*Hilda Kurtz: Reflections on the UUFA Pilgrimage to Selma*

Over the last few years, I have been horrified and galvanized by the deaths of Trayvon Martin and countless other boys and men of color who were senselessly murdered by vigilantes or police officers. Most recently Walter Scott was killed in cold blood by a North Charleston police officer, and buried yesterday. These men and boys, and their families and their communities, are the victims of ruinous racial mistrust and misunderstanding.

So it was important for me to go to Selma to bear witness to the tremendous progress that has been made beyond the sanctioned racial violence on which this country was built, to honor the courage and generosity of spirit of the people of the civil rights movement, but also to bear witness to the fact that the road to racial equality and social justice stretches yet ahead.

The trip got off to a bit of a stumbling start, but soon we were on the road, talking, singing, getting to know each other a little better. UUs gathered at the City of St Jude in Montgomery for lunch and a moving service of reflection, prayer and song. We got to Selma, gathered in a park, there was a prayer and a hymn, and we set off for the bridge.

Somewhere along the way that day, I realized that we were on a pilgrimage. Recognition settled on me like a mantle, strengthening and clarifying our purpose in making the journey. In that

recognition, I felt linked, deeply, to countless pilgrims journeying in different ways, times, and places. A pilgrimage is a journey to a special, unusual or holy place, a place of importance to a person's belief or faith. Interestingly, Merriam Webster also defines a pilgrimage as "the course of life on earth". I experienced this pilgrimage as the intersection of these definitions - an intersection of my own life narrative – my course of life on earth - and the deeper human narrative of the quest for social justice and the beloved community.

It was incredibly meaningful to walk though Selma with tens of thousands of other people from many walks of life, who had also been moved to pay homage and bear witness in Selma. It was a diverse crowd in so many ways – ethnically and racially to be sure, and I'd say at least four generations represented, and then the many different ways that people offered themselves and shared their views – with commemorations and invocations on T-shirts, signs, banners, and hats. There was some music and some drumming, and palpable excitement in a hot crowd, but overall, it seemed a somber event. I realized especially looking at the photos we shared in Shutterfly that almost no-one is smiling on the march itself.

You can also see many UUs in their yellow T-shirts in the hundreds of photos we took and shared. Of course. Selma is a place of importance in religious traditions like ours which hold dear "The inherent worth and dignity of every person" and "Justice, equity and compassion in human relations", the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>s principles of UUism, if I may call it that.

In making the pilgrimage to Selma, UUs joined with diverse spiritual traditions that encompass, encourage, and sometimes require religious pilgrimage. While our lives as spiritual seekers can readily be understood as pilgrimages, pilgrimage as a religious observance takes on additional valence. Pilgrimage is a deeply human tradition through which we renew ourselves and our intentions, and honor our spiritual guides. You may remember that some of the earliest English literature, the Canterbury Tales, are the stories of pilgrims to Canterbury Cathedral and a shrine to Thomas a Becket. The tales reveal rich and multi-faceted humanity and human understanding. We have heard of, and some of us may have experienced, renowned pilgrimages like the Jewish journey to the Western Wall in Jerusalem, or Muslim *hajj* to the *Kas'bah* in Mecca. I will close with a brief account of one person's experience of the *hajj* as food for thought:

*There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were all colors, from blue-eyed blondes, to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe could never exist between the white and the non-white. America needs to understand Islam because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem.*

The words are those of Malcolm X. Malcolm X spoke out for voting rights at the Brown Chapel in Selma in February 1965 and was assassinated two weeks later. Fifty years on, UUs joined tens of thousands of diverse pilgrims from far and wide, walking together in a spirit of unity to pay homage to the moral courage shown by civil right activists. I hope that we as a congregation can continue in this pilgrimage both metaphorical and material, to not only stand on the side of love, but to continue the march toward full recognition in our society of the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

Black parents, from across many class backgrounds, routinely coach their sons in how to comport themselves in the event they are confronted by a police officer. They do this because their sons are deeply vulnerable to harassment and violence at the hands of fellow citizens and police officers alike, just by virtue of their position in a racialized hierarchy. *I look at my own two white sons, and think how painful it would be to have to explain those ugly facts of life in 21<sup>st</sup> century America to them and tell that they would be the object of distrustful scrutiny for the rest of their lives. NO parent should have to tell their children things like that. More importantly, NO boys should have to fight an uphill and long-term battle for their own self-esteem in the face of broad-based societal mistrust and misgivings about their very inclusion in society. Such inhumanity is unconscionable.*

*Jessica Fay: My feelings about the Selma March (Talking Points)*

When I signed up for the Selma trip, I knew that I would be filled with a mix of emotions. My emotions ranged from pride, sadness, frustration, gratitude, and determination.

As a black person, I felt a swelling of pride as I listened to the stories of black people who marched and faced such hatred, and I felt an extreme sadness that 50 years had gone by and black people were still dying by the hands of corrupt, racist police officers

As a member of a family with LBGTQ members, I felt frustrated that Alabama's progressiveness in regards to the right for LBGTQ persons to marry was short-lived

As one half of an interracial couple, I felt gratitude for being able to love my husband and his family, and for them to love me in return, without having to hide our love. And, I felt thankful that I was able to hold my mother-in-law's hand as we crossed the bridge. The moment we crossed, I sent a silent prayer of thanks to all those who had fought for my right to love whom I chose

As a future mother, I feel happy and blessed that my children will be exposed to so much diversity from mine and my husband's families. I am determined to teach them to honor and respect diversity in all its many glorious forms, so that they can do their part to help this country and our world move forward towards peace.

*Rev. Alison Wilbur Eskildsen:*

I was 10 years old and living in New Jersey when the events in Selma unfolded in 1965. I don't remember being aware of the violence of 'Bloody Sunday' nor of the murders of two fellow Unitarian Universalists.

Now, I can't help but see racial inequity, the latest example just this past week when Walter Scott was killed in North Charleston. I cannot hide behind the safety of my white privilege. In fact, white is not safe until black, brown, red and yellow are safe.

I went to Selma to show the black community they were not alone in their anger and grief, and that I too demand respect, equality, and opportunity for all. I went to Selma because black lives

mattered in 1965 and black lives matter in 2015. I went to Selma to help heal wounds still raw from 1965 and to heal new wounds created by every killing of a black male on our nation's streets today.

I didn't know what to expect in Selma, but when the bus drove down a residential side street to reach the park where UUs were to meet up, my heart sank. We rode in / high on our cushioned bus seats, while outside our picture windows was a neighborhood showing few signs of prosperity. I wondered what these mostly-black residents might be thinking of our mostly-white busload riding into their town. I wondered if they thought we might be co-opting their commemoration and that we had no right to be there. I worried they might think it was another case of white power moving in on their event.

But we UUs had been invited by the commemoration organizers, we were not unwanted guests. We had shown up back then, in fact more UU clergy answered King's call than by any other denomination. And we had sacrificed two of our own for a cause we shared. We were one in solidarity then, as we are one in solidarity today. I wanted the black community who had sacrificed and suffered so much more than me, to not condemn my presence.

Once the march got underway, by the time we turned a street corner and faced the Edmund Pettus Bridge, the street was so crowded we moved at a snail's pace. But the crowd was jubilant. Despite the bright sunshine, heat, and wall-to-wall bodies, people were polite and happy. The crowd became one body and one heart, with thousands of feet stepping forward together.

Each step brought me closer to the infamous bridge, its name stretching out overhead, just as it had fifty years ago. I couldn't help but compare the upbeat atmosphere around me to the unspeakable violence visited upon the original marchers and the horror they endured while on this very same spot. I felt the ghosts of that bloody day witnessing our march, joining our march. I offered a silent prayer of thanks for their courage. I breathed in some of their spirit, hoping to give me greater courage to stand against the powerful, to dismantle inequality, and to fight new laws that create unfair barriers to voting.

Going to Selma was a touchstone moment for me. Walking that bridge allowed me to connect to a past I had not been part of but wanted to be part of today. Walking that bridge showed me we've come a long way, but although I was able to cross to the other side, the bridge that will carry us all over our troubled waters, and will settle those waters, has yet to be built. But we can and will build it. We shall one day, some day, soon.

### **Questions for Reflection and Discussion**

1. Share a story of your first awareness of race or experience of racism or marginalization. How did this or subsequent events affect your feelings or behavior around racial justice?
2. What are your own thoughts or feelings in regard to the 50th anniversary of 'Bloody Sunday'?
3. Are we moving forward or backward in our march towards greater human rights? Why?