

"Orloff - what took YOU to Selma?"

WARNING - the following presentation is avowedly autobiographical. As such, it may be either self aggrandizing, or (less likely) protective of the actual facts of the matter - or, perhaps, revealing of more than you wanted to know. I leave it to your judgment.

I still remember my first day in second grade. She was seated in about the 3rd row, next to the windows - and she was black. Not only that, she had her hair done up in short little braids which covered her head. I had never seen such a person before in all my 7 years of life.

When I went home for lunch that day and described her to my parents, my father, a small town Methodist minister, said she must be a "pickaninny." I cannot recall her name, nor does she appear in my recollections of the next 3 years of school while we lived in that suburb of Akron, Ohio. I have a dim notion that she must have lived near the brick factory on the edge of town. Yet, her memory haunts me to this day, for she was possibly my first African-American contact. (Contact? did our class play Red Rover during recess? If so, then perhaps our hands may have touched.)

In case some of you are wondering, "pickaninny," in those days, was a common white term for a Negro child - as those who recall Walt Disney's early technicolor film "Song of the South" may remember. And a black horse which was part of my father's family bore the affectionate nickname, "Nig" (N-I-G). I leave it to you to arrive at that horse's full given name.

During World War 2, while my father as a US Army Air Corps chaplain was following closely on the heels of Field Marshall Erwin Rommel (Germany's "Desert Fox") and the panzer divisions of his Afrika Korps - I had become a member of the Columbus Boychoir School, which achieved success at Town Hall, New York, and on the stage of the summer colony at Chautauqua. The Boychoir had been founded near the end of the Depression with the idea of bringing music into the lives of young boys from poor families. And though plenty of poor black families lived in Columbus, and though we

sang a few Negro spirituals, nary a black face was ever seen among us. Today, having long since moved to Princeton NJ, it has become the darling of New York music aficionados as the American Boychoir - and is, of course, nowadays well integrated.

I went to high school in a small town on the Ohio River. Our class included one talented black football player, whose name I can recall - though I don't remember ever having exchanged three words with Bill Hocker, whose father probably earned his livelihood as a coal miner.

Such was the white world in which I spent my childhood.

Yet, at the same time, my mother and father were attempting to teach me the principles of Christian brotherhood: "In Christ there is no East or West, in him no South or North, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide world." I was quite active in the Methodist Youth Fellowship, and along with 10,000 other MYF'ers at a national gathering one winter in the Cleveland Civic Auditorium I heard the great Negro singer, Roland Hayes, as he asked us in song, "Were You There When They Crucified My Lord?"

The next summer I rode a train from Ohio to Iowa for a regional Methodist youth leadership conference. After changing in Chicago, I noticed another lone figure sitting at the far end of our rail car, reading from a well known booklet of daily devotions for youth. I wondered if he and I might both be MYF'ers, going to the same conference, but I said nothing to him - he was black.

However, arriving in Clear Lake, Iowa, since we were the only two passengers to get off we introduced ourselves, learned that we were both PK's (preacher's kids) from Ohio, and decided to bunk together. That young man's name was James Lawson.

A bit over a decade later James Lawson, having graduated from Oberlin College, and having spent time in a West Virginia jail as a "C.O." (Conscientious Objector) during the Korean War - and additional time in India studying Mohandas Gandhi's "Satyagraha" (soul force) - that same Jim Lawson enrolled in Vanderbilt University where he began to train other Negro students in the techniques of Non-Violent Resistance. Within that first

small group were names destined to become well known in the struggle for Civil Rights: James Bevel, Diane Nash, John Lewis. Together, under the tutelage of Jim Lawson, they integrated the lunch counters of Nashville, Tennessee and went on to become founders of SNCC ("Snick") the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee.

Soon, James Lawson became Dr Martin Luther King's personal choice to train other Civil Rights leaders in non-violent techniques. Some years later, Jim was the Methodist minister whom destiny chose to invite Martin Luther King to join the garbage collectors in their strike for decent wages in Memphis, Tennessee - the city where King would meet his death by an assassin's bullet.

As for myself, when I returned from that conference in Iowa, I remember shyly commenting to the Methodist kids back home that even though I had bunked with James Lawson, none of his color had rubbed off on me!

At Mount Union College (last month that little Methodist college in Ohio won the US national Division III football championship for the 6th time in 7 years), I remember that our star running back, Napoleon Bell, was a Negro - though I don't recall ever speaking to him. I also remember a classmate, George Lewis, who lived in my dormitory.

I had three roommates, and when George entered our single room one evening while I was trying to type up a term paper, I recall throwing him out - one more person had made that overcrowded room just too noisy! To this day, my best friend from those years believes my action was due to racial prejudice.

I also joined a fraternity - none of the national fraternities on our campus were integrated in those days - rationalizing that decision to my parents with the justification that "I can help change the system from within." I enjoyed frat life, but the system did not change!

Integration and I both arrived at Boston University in the fall of 1953. There I was asked if I would be willing to have a Negro roommate. Remembering Jim Lawson, I

immediately said "yes" and was introduced to Philip Cousin of Florida, son of a presiding elder in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Together, Phil and I became members of the Seminary Singers which toured the South that winter, singing in Negro colleges and white Methodist churches. I shall never forget our concert at the huge downtown Methodist church in St Petersburg, the main floor completely filled with a Sunday evening white audience, while up in the balcony sat one Negro man - alone. It was Philip's father, and the year was 1954.

I suspect our bookings at Negro colleges may have been due to Howard Thurman. Boston University had just hired him as its Dean of the Chapel - the first Negro in America to hold such a post at a previously all white faculty university. One of the schools where we sang was in Daytona Beach, where Howard Thurman had spent his childhood. I shall always remember sitting at the feet of the school's founder, Mary McLeod Bethune, legendary Negro educator in her home on the campus of Bethune-Cookman College.

Back at Boston University, I was also privileged to sit at the feet of Howard Thurman, himself, during his course on "Spiritual Disciplines." His discipline never became part of me but I held him in awe, for he was a true religious mystic while I was on the way to becoming a religious Humanist. Later, his daughter Anne was a member of my staff at UUA headquarters as editor of our UU campus magazine, the liberal context, while her father would be featured speaker at two of the General Assemblies of the UUA. (Anne Thurman was among the friends and family who met my plane when I returned from Selma in 1965, and her father's handwritten note remains among my treasured mementos of Selma.) Years later, when I moved to California, it was my great joy to get to know Howard Thurman as an ordinary mortal - we shared our mutual love of Ted Williams and the Boston Red Sox - before I became, all too soon, one of the honorary bearers of his casket following the memorable three hour funeral at San Francisco's First Unitarian Church.

During my first year at BU, I also recall a shadowy presence in the stacks of the theological school library. It would be years before we met, but I later learned that the

shadow had been cast by Martin Luther King Jr while he was working on his PhD - and at the same time courting a Boston University music major from Alabama by the name of Coretta Scott.

Together, Martin and Coretta visited Arlington Street Church (among others), and flirted with the idea of becoming Unitarians but they realized that King's destiny lay with his own people - whereas the Unitarians were likely to remain a mostly white people's church. The following December, Dr King became leader of the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, and the rest is history.

Meanwhile, my roommate Phil Cousin got married in North Carolina to his college sweetheart. I hitch-hiked to Winston-Salem and was the only white friend present at the wedding. Philip eventually became a bishop in the AME Church, and the first black president of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA.

Why am I sharing this very personal history with you? I had not considered doing so until Birthe Stein pressed me to explain why I had gone to Selma, Alabama in 1965. Why had I been so quick to respond to Martin Luther King's telegram? Prior to my personal nostalgic pilgrimage last winter to various important sites of the struggle for civil rights in America, I had always assumed it was mostly due to my experiences as a Unitarian Universalist - the experience of working with UU students involved in sit-ins and other demonstrations, joining with other UU's in the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, and my participation in the UU staff team that went to Mississippi in January 1965. But the further I traveled on my pilgrimage, the more I realized there was more to it than that. How we choose to live our lives is determined at a very early age, and if you take home nothing else from my ramblings this day, I hope you will be reminded of the critical importance for our children of early life experiences.

The East Harlem Protestant Parish in NYC enlisted the services of theological students to staff its summer programs. Working with Negro and Puerto Rican families between 92nd and 106th streets east of Central Park and bordering the East River, the parish

provided religious education, cultural field trips and recreational opportunities for children and youth - plus referrals for parents and other adults to the city's social service agencies. Absentee landlords who refused to repair their rental apartments were a major problem, as were alcohol and drugs.

Less than a year into our marriage, my first wife and I spent the summer of 1955 living in the NYC owned East River Housing Project, and working out of a nearby Presbyterian Church where Norman Thomas, the great Socialist Party leader, had once been minister.

Elevators in the project always smelled of urine - it's a long way to the 14th floor toilet for young kids playing on the street level playground! My wife and I both taught in the daily Vacation Bible School. And while Mary Jane was taking some of the younger children to Central Park, to various museums and on boat trips to the Statue of Liberty, I spent two weeks with junior and senior high school boys from East Harlem, hiking and camping in southern Vermont - along a portion of the Appalachian Trail. I especially recall my first night out with the younger boys - there was no moon. Worse than that for these ghetto kids, there were no street lights, no cops on the corner, and strange noises in the woods. Which meant they were scared much of the time, did not wander far, and we had a good week.

The second week was with the older boys, whom I soon discovered were brandishing about knives and even machetes which they had brought "for protection against bears and mountain lions" which they fully expected to encounter. Fortunately, in my time with the younger boys, I had let my beard grow and now appeared a bit older than my 24 years. We managed to avoid any untoward incidents, and I used the machetes to flip pancakes. A few years later, I convinced the church in my first parish to invite East Harlem children to spend two weeks in the homes of our small New Hampshire village - a first for that town!

Erroll Haywood was an organist, and the only Negro in the student group to which I was advisor as a seminary intern during my 2nd year in Boston. In addition to race, Erroll was

also going through the hell of trying to cope with the issue of his own sexuality - a subject about which I knew zilch! In those days, homosexuality was treated as an illness, and I recall visiting him at a mental hospital where he spent some time that year. Later, he became a frequent visitor in our New Hampshire home where our two children were born. He had become a cherished member of our extended family. Some years after my experience in Selma, Erroll was hired as a front office "token" Black by IBM, while pursuing African studies at Boston University. But it was just all too much, and he chose to commit suicide - my first gay African-American.

When the UUA was created in 1961, I was hired as Director of its new Office of College Centers, and as Staff Advisor to Student Religious Liberals (SRL). The Civil Rights movement was now in full swing, and UU students were demonstrating on college campuses, helping to integrate public facilities - both north and south. In August of 1963, members of SRL carried the huge UUA banner as a large contingent of UU's (students and adults) joined in the "March for jobs and Freedom" in Washington DC. Yes, I was among those present that bright sun-shine day, standing far back in the crowd facing the Lincoln Memorial, listening to many speakers that day, but recalling most especially Martin Luther King Jr telling us, "I have a dream...that one day..."

Meanwhile, the Rev James Reeb had joined the staff of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington, and become involved in the struggle for fair housing in our nation's capital. Soon he became chair of the newly organized University Neighborhoods Council - jointly sponsored by Howard University and other neighborhood groups, including All Souls Church. He was also advisor to several UU student organizations on campuses in the DC area - which is how Jim and I became acquainted.

My earliest memory of James Reeb probably dates from 1961 or thereabouts, as I entered the parish house of All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington DC in search of its Assistant Minister. Jim was seated with feet on his desk, smoking a cigar and chatting on the phone - then and there shattering any preconceptions I might have had of this ex-Presbyterian. I myself was by then an ex-Methodist, some four years younger than Jim who at that time was about 34. I had come from Boston to visit campuses in the Washington area where Jim was our designated UU college centers minister.

We hit it off well, as Jim took time to acquaint me with student and faculty contacts at the several nearby colleges and universities I wanted to visit. I especially remember his taking me to visit the nearby campus of Howard University with its mostly Negro student body. Over the next 3-4 years we saw one another only occasionally at various UU meetings, for Jim's first love was helping to integrate the neighborhood between All Souls Church and Howard University. But we had occasional contact by phone and mail.

Imagine my surprise, during the year-end holidays of 1964, to bump into Jim in the lobby of a movie theater in Boston. Each of us, as dutiful fathers, had brought our children to see "Sound of Music." It was on that occasion I learned that Jim and his family had recently moved to Boston where he had become Community Relations Director for the Negro neighborhood of Roxbury-Dorchester under auspices of the American Friends Service Committee (the noted Quaker group). Jim's primary focus was fair housing.

The next time I saw Jim was the night of March 8, 1965 among a planeload of UU and other ministers flying from Boston to Atlanta. We were responding to Dr Martin Luther King's telegraphed request, asking clergy of all faiths to join him in Alabama, for a march from Selma to Montgomery as a demonstration for Negro voting rights. The idea for such a long march had come as a result of the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a young Negro teacher who had been shot by an Alabama state trooper in late February while attempting to protect his grandfather in the aftermath of a voting rights demonstration in nearby Marion, Alabama.

Network television cameras on Sunday, March 7th had filmed an unsuccessful attempt to begin that long march from Selma, with scenes at the Edmund Pettus Bridge over the Alabama River which would quickly become infamous across America and around the world - scenes of a sheriff's posse, mounted on horseback, indiscriminately clubbing and tear gassing peaceful Negro marchers, men, women, and children, as they demonstrated for voting rights. Arriving in Atlanta before daybreak, with those TV scenes playing over and over in my mind, Jim and I, along with some other UU's tried to nap in the airport terminal before catching the morning plane for Montgomery.

Among those other UU's was Henry Hampton, a native of St Louis, and son of a medical doctor. As a youngster, Henry had contracted polio, and as an adult he still wore a metal leg brace, and walked with some difficulty. I knew Henry, because he was also a UUA staff member - one of several "token Blacks" - acting director of the UUA's Office of Information, and we worked on the same floor at UU headquarters as part of the Department of Adult Programs. Henry and I also had a special tie, because at a staff picnic the previous summer, my young daughter had attempted to swim in water too deep for her abilities - and without a 2nd thought, Henry had jumped in the pool (leg brace and all) and rescued her.

Now he was headed for Selma, with camera, presumably to take pictures - but also determined to march in support of voting rights for his Black brothers and sisters. (It was the experience of walking the bridge in Selma that gave birth to Henry Hampton's great gift to United States history, his 6-part PBS television series, "Eyes on the Prize" which documents the Civil Rights movement.)

A caravan of cars and trucks, driven by volunteers, shuttled back and forth between the airport at Montgomery to the AME Brown Chapel in Selma, as clergy from as far away as California responded to Dr. King's telegram. There, we were warmly welcomed, heard speeches, and watched as veterans of months of voting rights demonstrations in Selma gave short courses in the tactics of nonviolent action, including how best to defend ourselves if attacked.

Then Martin Luther King, Jr arrived and we marched, from Brown Chapel to the Pettus Bridge, across the Alabama River to where a phalanx of Alabama state troopers blocked our way. We knelt in prayer, then the line of march turned around and we returned to the chapel - in considerable bewilderment. At Brown Chapel, Dr King explained that a US district court, fearing more violence, had put a restraining order on that day's march. However, he pleaded with us to remain in Selma for another day or two, until the restraining order might be lifted. Negro homes in Selma would provide us with a place to sleep, and we were cautioned for our own safety to eat only in Negro restaurants.

We UU ministers (and a few non-clergy UU's) held a short caucus beside the chapel, and many elected to stay - even though most had not brought even a toothbrush. Quite a few of us found our way to Walker's Cafe where we were served tasty fried chicken. Joining Jim and me at our table was Clark Olsen, a UU minister from California. Clark served as our UU college centers minister in Berkeley, and was planning to lead a summer student trip to Russia - advertised by our Boston office. Having served as campus minister in Washington DC, Jim Reeb and I were both interested in hearing about Clark's expected itinerary.

After eating, each of us in turn phoned our wives from a booth in the restaurant to let them know of the day's events, that we were safe, and that we would be staying in Selma for at least another day. I telephoned first, then purchased a cigar and, while waiting for the others, stood outside leaning against the front window of the restaurant, smoking my cigar.

It was just dusk of a warm spring evening, the downtown area felt quite peaceful, and I recall thinking "this could be any downtown street of any town in America." (What I did not know was that the variety store across the street was owned by a family which included a member of the Ku Klux Klan, and that the café at the next corner was known to be a Klan hangout). Clark and Jim joined me shortly, and we set out for Brown Chapel. We walked three abreast, with Jim next to the curb and Clark on my other side. Suddenly we became aware of shouts, "Hey, you niggers...!" as 3 or 4 white bigots came at us from across the street. Attacking us from behind, at least one carried a large club - possibly a baseball bat or length of pipe - with which he took a roundhouse swing at Jim's head, a crushingly lethal blow.

Then followed the nightmare of our attempts to get Jim to a hospital - first in Selma, and finally late that night in Birmingham.

The death two days later of this white northern clergyman (unlike the death of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a Negro - just 2 weeks before) galvanized a national response to the issue of Black voting rights. Ten days later, the March from Selma to Montgomery began,

protected by federalized national guard troops. President Johnson, who had sent yellow roses to Jim's hospital room, referred to "that good man" as he sent a new voting rights bill to Congress. It was passed in August, and in the years that followed Blacks began to be elected to public office all across America.

Perhaps, as I said to his grieving wife at the hospital in Birmingham, "Jim was the right man, at the right place, at the right time." On the other hand, if I hadn't been smoking a cigar outside that Selma restaurant, perhaps four young children would have grown up with a father.

"He died....but we must do a harder thing than dying is, we must think, and ghosts will drive us on."

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An address to Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Paris, France
by Orloff W Miller, Emeritus Emeritus Minister-at-Large, European UU's
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