

Birmingham Lecture

Claiming Our Prophetic Voice

Do We Really Want to Proclaim our Prophetic Voice?

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"UURMAPA" stands for Unitarian Universalist Retired Ministers and Partners Association. It meets in four places across the country, once a year. At the meeting of UURMAPA-WEST, last May, on hearing of the plans for Convocation this Spring in Birmingham, there was considerable excitement. There was a lot of mental reviewing of events in the "deep South" long ago. Thirty-five years ago, thirty-eight years ago, forty years ago, when many of you were teen-agers. Some of you had not been born. They hoped that someone would be here to tell you that you meet on "hallowed ground". Ground hallowed by events sacred in our past.

Birmingham, Montgomery, Selma, Atlanta, Georgia, Jackson, Mississippi, Philadelphia, Mississippi. Names graven in our memories: Jimmie Lee Jackson, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, Donald Thompson, Clark Olsen, Orloff Miller. Names few of you know the significance of: Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, Carole Robertson, Denise McNair. Other names you are all aware of: Martin Luther King, Jr., James Reeb, Viola Liuzzo.

Thirty-seven years ago, almost to the day, I was here in Birmingham. It was March 24, 1965. UU ministers from all over the United States were converging on Birmingham and assembling at the Unitarian Church on Cahaba Road. The good people of Larry McGinty's and Al Hobart's church were preparing to feed supper to these traveling ministers. Someone said that they could use help carving turkey in the kitchen. So that's what I was doing in the kitchen when the telephone rang. One of the church women answered the phone, listened for a minute, then angrily said, "Well, you will just have to get in line then!", and hung up and turned back to her task. "What was that?", another asked her. "Oh, just another bomb threat!", she answered.

The ministers had gathered in response to a request from "25 Beacon Street" to join Martin Luther King, Jr., on the last day of his march from Selma to Montgomery. With our sleeping bags, we came to Birmingham because there was not room enough in Montgomery for the 25,000 or so who were responding to King's request. The UUA had made arrangement for buses to transport us from Birmingham to Montgomery and back. The plan had been that we would "sack-out" on the floor of the Birmingham church, but "25" had to take seriously the multiple threats to bomb the church, which if it did happen would decimate the UU ministry. So instead of sleeping on the floor of the church, we were picked up by Unitarian families and dispersed to Unitarian homes around the city.

After the big rally and the last day's triumphant march into Montgomery, six of us were in a motel, watching the television news of the march, when we heard that Viola Liuzzo had been shot and killed as she drove marchers out of Montgomery. She had been attending the Unitarian Universalist church in Detroit.

But back up a month. I just came in at the end of the story. At the end of February, Martin Luther King

had gone to Selma to rally supporters for civil rights, and proposed to walk from Selma to the Capitol in Montgomery to demand change. Martin Luther King and 770 Blacks were arrested. As they attempted to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge, a riot ensued. You have no doubt seen pictures of it. Martin Luther King then asked the clergy of America to come to Selma to support the effort. A large number of UUs were among those who came. On March 11, three of our ministers who had come to Selma, after finishing their dinner, on emerging from the restaurant, were attacked. Orloff Miller, Clark Olsen and Jim Reeb were beaten -- Jim died. The UUA Board of Trustees was in session at "25" at the time, and when they heard the news, they adjourned the meeting, flew to Selma, and in the basement of Brown Chapel, resumed their deliberations. There was impressive UU involvement in the proceedings that followed. Dana Greeley and Homer Jack took leadership roles. Eventually, the Federalized National Guard escorted Martin Luther King and three hundred of the demonstrators on their five day, fifty mile march from Selma to Montgomery. One of the three hundred was a Unitarian Universalist, the Rev. Richard Leonard, Minister of Education at Community Church in New York. We were so lucky that someone there had a sense of the historic nature of what was happening and took voluminous notes every day. That person was Richard Leonard. His just published, *Call to Selma, Eighteen Days of Witness*, is must reading for all of us.

The events of March, 1965, became a turning point in Civil Rights, and in our country's history. We can be proud of the large number of UUs who responded; who responded not just to the request of Martin Luther King and of "25 Beacon Street", but who responded to their own "inner imperatives" that said to them, "Go!".

The inner imperative: that's what we are here to talk about and explore. The inner imperative. The prophetic imperative. The voice of God. It is at the very core of a large part of religion. It is deeper than the various surface manifestations of so-called organized religions. It motivates us all: Buddhist, Christian, Moslem, Jew, Unitarian Universalist, Humanist, Atheist. And in a sense, it unites us all.

While the inner imperative motivates us all, it doesn't motivate us all in the same way. God doesn't speak to everyone the same. Before I go on with this thought, I must first tell you that I am an atheist; I don't believe in God. But I am a mystic. I am a poet. So I hope you will bear with me while I mix up my metaphors. God doesn't speak to everyone the same. A social consciousness is weak in some, strong in others, demanding in a few. But social progress makes headway only when the prophetic voice speaks loud and clear.

What is social consciousness? It is an ethical awareness that something is wrong. The voice of God, the inner imperative, says, "Do something about it!" Do something about it, yes. But what?

We all know about the infamous "School of the Assassins", at Fort Benning, Georgia, where our government trained right-wing paramilitary people to wreak havoc in Central America. Some of us researched it for ourselves and talked about it in sermons. Some wrote our Congresspersons and urged that it be closed. Some of us went to Fort Benning and joined with others in protest. Nick Cardell went further and allowed himself to be arrested, and spent six months in prison.

The inner imperative. The prophetic imperative. The voice of God. Yielding to the prophetic imperative can prove dangerous. Nick spent six months in prison.

The prophet is perceived as dangerous. He or she is a threat to the status quo, a threat to those in power who control the situation which the prophet seeks to rectify. When the prophet builds a large enough following, when those who think like he or she does begin to agitate for change, the danger for those in power and for the status quo becomes larger. Then their tactics change. Those in power may appear to concede. But it is only a ploy. When the actual training manual for the School of the Assassins was made public, those in power said that they had revised the manual, but the training still went on. It is still going on! The ploy is to appear to join the prophet's followers, but only so they can lead them into a safer place

where they are no longer a threat to the status quo.

Jesus, the prophet, for example. When his followers became too large to control and were beginning to seriously threaten the status quo, the Emperor Constantine joined the church and declared Jesus to be God. That satisfied the Christians, but then Jesus' message, his teachings, were no longer a threat. Now Jesus was to be worshipped; not listened to, certainly not followed.

Martin Luther King, Jr., the prophet, suffered the same fate as Jesus. When it became apparent that King's ideas on Civil Rights and on war were gaining too many followers, those in power appeared to join the Civil Rights cause and the anti-war sentiment, and declared King's birthday a National Holiday! That quieted the uproar, and allowed the government to go slow on civil rights, and once again increase the "defense" budget.

It is a lot safer to exercise a little prudence, and not go spouting off every time some public official tramples on the Bill of Rights, or spends public money for private gain. But safer or not, the "inner imperative" begins to agitate. It seems to be the historic role of religion to speak out, to object, from Nathan's confrontation with David, to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's and Norbert Capek's confronting the Third Reich, and paying with their lives.

Fortunately, we don't all have to go that far. As I said earlier, while we all seem to be endowed with a social consciousness, it is relatively weak in some, strong in others, but demanding in a few. It takes all, working together, to effect social change. Martin Luther King could not have changed America by himself, no matter how strongly God spoke to him. It took thousands of others, each following the admonitions of their "inner imperatives" in all their varieties, to create the atmosphere which allowed Martin Luther King to change America.

I was raised in a family atmosphere which created a recognition of the sacred quality of the inner imperative, that it was, quite literally, the voice of God. Raised a Quaker, it was known as the "Inner Light". Pacifism was the strongest element which set us off from others. Oh, there was also the strong Quaker witness against the use of tobacco and liquor, and we were taught never to swear. The admonition against swearing sort of led the way into confrontation with governmental agencies, as we were taught never to take an oath, to "swear to tell the truth", but use only the simple affirmation, "I will tell the truth." But it was pacifism, as being a refusal to bear arms, that really caused a conscious recognition that in matters of religion we could be brought face to face in opposition to our government. The Quaker heritage in our family, I found in later years' research as the family historian, stretched back to William Penn bringing it to Pennsylvania and Maryland. But as the family moved westward there were many times that there was no Friends Meeting. The family always attended the local church, but remembered that they were Quakers who listened for the guidance of the Inner Light. In 1933, our family moved from southern California to El Paso, Texas, where there was no Friends Meeting. As the war started in Europe, we drove back to California, and as a family, joined the First Friends Meeting in Whittier. Thereafter, as Quaker leaders passed through El Paso, they would stay overnight in our home, and our Quaker religion took on a new importance. I was not allowed to play in the ROTC band in high school, as it was a military organization. When the Selective Service law was passed and young men began to be drafted, my father became the local representative of the NSBRO, the National Service Board for Religious Objectors, and began to counsel young men facing the draft. When my time came, I registered as a conscientious objector, and my "Inner Light" bade me study for the Friends ministry. We had joined the local Congregational Unitarian church. At the time, the Friends had no seminaries, so upon graduation, I went to the College of the Bible at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, a Disciples of Christ college where my father had studied when he had once decided to try the ministry. At the seminary I began to get a more realistic understanding of my own Quaker heritage. The Friends Meeting in Whittier, California, where my membership was, I realized was "Orthodox", trinitarian, whereas I felt more at home in the "Hicksite", theologically unitarian branch. But the "Hicksite" meetings were unprogrammed

meetings without ministers. So it was that facing graduation from seminary, my father and I traveled to Boston for our first May Meetings, met with the Fellowship Committee for a single hour-long meeting, and were accepted into Fellowship. I am sure it would not have been so easy had it happened a few years later. Like my Quaker ancestors, I had joined a new church, but inside I was still a Quaker. Fortunately, my new Unitarian denomination honored this.

The fifty-some years in the Unitarian ministry seemed to be constantly confronting me in opposition to our government. The Quaker "Inner Light", the voice of God, the inner imperative, the prophetic imperative, seemed almost to dominate. Speak out against this! Speak out against that! I was no sooner in my first parish than the Korean War broke out. Fortunately for me, I was at the time Associate Minister to Arthur Olsen in Toledo, Ohio. The religious imperative was as strong in Arthur as it was in me. He melded my "Inner Light" into the "prophetic imperative". Arthur was a great model for me, and continued as my mentor the rest of his years.

On going to Wayland, Massachusetts, in 1950, I was only 25 years old, and I did not have the wisdom of years that Arthur had earned. Soon, at the high point of the "red scare" of Senator Joseph McCarthy, I was in trouble for openly speaking my mind. Several in the congregation were incensed over my sermons, and demanded that the Standing Committee fire me. Fortunately, the congregational vote retained me, and a goodly number of previously uncommitted liberals in the community, on seeing the congregation support me, decided to join the church and give added support. It was then that the F.B.I. started to build its file on me.

I supported Anne Hale, a member of my congregation, a popular, well-loved school teacher, who was being hounded and finally fired by the school board for having once been a communist, and who refused to beg for pardon. It hit the front page of the Boston newspapers, and we received hate mail and terrible telephone calls. But my great congregation stood firm.

On being called to Riverside, California, the first Universalist congregation west of the Rockies, I applied for and received Universalist Fellowship. It was during the tirade of the House UnAmerican Activities Committee hunting down individual citizens and labelling every liberal cause as being communist tainted. Their infamous film, "Operation Abolition", was produced, and the Riverside County sheriff was showing it to crowds of people, whipping them up to seek out the liberal "pinkos". Someone had to do something. In a sermon, I called on the Riverside County Grand Jury to investigate the sheriff for using public money for partisan political purposes, and the local newspaper printed the entire sermon. Radio commentator, Goodwin Knight, former Governor of California, on his state-wide radio broadcast, called me "the pinko minister in Riverside".

Moving on to Arizona, I succeeded my mentor, Arthur Olsen, who had led the public reaction in Phoenix against McCarthyism, and who had founded the Arizona Civil Liberties Union. One of his members, a local television personality, created a stir by going to Sweden to get an abortion. I was immediately engulfed in the Right to Choose. I helped found the Clergy Consultation on Problem Pregnancies, and with the guidance of a prominent Unitarian Ob/Gyn, I went to Mexico to arrange for abortions to be performed in a Mexican hospital by a U.S.-trained Ob/Gyn. I served on the Boards of the NAACP, the Urban League, the O.I.C. (Arizona's Opportunities Industrialization Center), and the A.C.L.U..

With the war drums beginning to sound again over Vietnam, and the draft being reinstated, it was back to draft counseling. With some wonderful ministers of other denominations: Episcopal, Presbyterian, Disciples, Lutheran, we started a Peace Center to educate the public against the war. Then President Reagan's dirty war in Central America, resulting in the Sanctuary Movement, caused refugees to flee from the right-wing death squads, trained at the School of the Assassins, massacring whole villages. Speak out! Speak out! Do something!

I have yet another connection with this city, -- Birmingham, -- a deeply spiritual one. On the second Sunday of my ministry in Phoenix, September 15, 1963, four Ku Klux Klan members planted a bomb in the Sunday School of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church here in Birmingham, and when it went off four little girls lay dead: Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson and Cynthia Wesley. An art professor at Arizona State University, John Waddell, was so moved by their deaths that he was inspired to create a memorial to the four girls, to try to atone for the senseless tragedy. Part way into his creation, he happened to tell me of what he was doing and why. It took him a year to create the four statues and cast them in bronze. He wanted them to be placed here in Birmingham, but nothing transpired to bring them. Eventually, they were given to our congregation in Phoenix and placed in a garden setting behind the church. We dedicated them to a recognition of the beauty of individual differences.

It is a sacred spot, full of spiritual depth. It is sacred to members of our church. It is sacred to the African Americans in Phoenix, many of whom bring their out-of-town guests there to meditate. A few years ago, when the minister of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church here in Birmingham, the Rev. Christopher Hamlin, heard about them, he came to Phoenix to see them for himself. He was so moved by them that he asked if the forms still existed, that the Sixteenth Street Church had to have a copy of its own. The original forms had been destroyed in a fire in the artist's studio, but having originally wanted them placed in Birmingham, the sculptor, John Waddell, took our statues back to his studio and made new forms. An ecumenical, bi-racial committee was formed in Phoenix to raise the money to create a new set as a gift to the Sixteenth Street Church and to Birmingham. Unfortunately, local politics here in Birmingham prevented the fulfillment of Rev. Hamlin's dream. The new castings of the statues are currently in the patio of the George Washington Carver Museum and Cultural Center in Phoenix, waiting their hoped for eventual placement here.

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