1965, Marion, Alabama. Civil Rights protester Jimmie Lee Jackson is shot and fatally wounded by Alabama State Trooper James Bonard Fowler. This event inspired the Selma-to-Montgomery March across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. But before this came years of planning, strategizing, protest and witness for equality. And years of continued oppression following each protest.

This weekend hundreds of Unitarian Universalists - many of my beloved ministerial colleagues - again travelled to Selma. This time the impetus was not an urgent telegram from a beleaguered leader. It is not a life-or-death proposition to make this trip and stand and march as witnesses this time, 50 years later. But it still matters. It is no less urgent. Blood may not be spilled this time around, but there is a ringing call for all of us still.

[As you can see,] I did not go to Selma. It was not because of lack of interest or commitment or even a lack of funds... it was just a result of scheduling. That sounds lame, and it begs the question - and maybe you've asked yourself this question, too - would I have gone down to Selma in 1965?

A naive 16 year-old at the time, probably not. I am embarrassed to admit that I really knew little regarding the attacks on civil rights marchers in the south back then. Like a lot of America, I lived in a bubble created by family and culture that was not deeply connected to the issues of the day. Certainly I had heard of this - some general knowledge flitted around the periphery of my brain. I knew about Martin Luther King Jr. and I knew there was a problem and I knew that people were being attacked. But I didn't KNOW it... did not see the news footage on TV... and I was not yet a habitual reader of the New York Times. And besides, it was dangerous.

Jean Sue Libkind told me that she wanted to go but her father “had a hissy fit. He said [her] big mouth would get [her] killed for sure.” So instead she stayed behind - at UW-Madison - and helped coordinate blankets and supplies to Selma and to the protest in D.C. One of her friends was going and worried about his safety, begged him to shave his beard before he went. He came back and told her she had probably saved his life.

As a Unitarian Universalist, I get to claim a lineage deeply connected to that struggle and those events. “We” were there! If you saw the movie “Selma” [how many?] you have the gist of the story. The timeline is not terribly clear as the movie unfolds, but we know some of the facts anyway. The Unitarian Universalist version goes something like this:
Reverend Orloff Miller at the Unitarian Universalist Association received a call from his colleague the Rev. Homer Jack, telling him that the UUA had received a telegram from Dr. King - that was the call to come and be part of the march after the events of “Bloody Sunday” - that first march over the bridge where there was a vicious and violent attack on the protestors by state troopers and a sheriff’s posse. Dr. King knew that without the involvement of other people - especially clergy committed to civil rights - this march was not going to happen.

So Miller began phoning across the country to other Unitarian Universalist ministers. There was no faxing available then - no e-mail certainly and no tweeting or texting - just the telephone and the telegraph office.

In his office in the Boston neighborhood of Roxbury, Rev. James Reeb - a white American, who left parish ministry to work and live in the African-American community - got the call. He and his wife (Marie Reeb) had walked side by side during the March on Washington in 1963. But this was different - it was dangerous. Marie objected to his going - they had four small children. Rev. Reeb was steadfast - and she gave in. (Miller, too, was married with two young children.)

And out in California, the Rev. Clark Olsen, minister of the Berkeley Fellowship of Unitarians, heard the call on his car radio. And he needed to go, but had no money to do so. When he arrived home he found a message waiting: A couple from his congregation had offered to pay his way. Like Reeb and Miller, Olsen had a child—a three-year-old daughter - but he and his wife decided that he should go.

Miller, Reeb and Olsen met up in Selma. They ate dinner together in Walker’s Café - this is not depicted accurately in the film... After dinner, the three left the café and were walking away when four or five white locals came out onto the street and began yelling. The men ran at them and attacked from behind. At least one had a club of some kind and took a swing at Reeb’s head... they heard it land. Olsen and Miller were punched and kicked.

After their attackers fled, the three staggered to the SCLC office around the block and an ambulance was summoned. Reeb died the next day. President Johnson called to offer her his condolences. Martin Luther King Jr. called, too.

It was this attack and Reeb’s death that galvanized Unitarian Universalists into action. On Saturday, the UUA Board recessed its meeting in Boston and eight members flew to Birmingham. At least 109 UU ministers had gathered in Selma for Reeb's Memorial Service. UUA President Dana McLean Greeley joined ecumenical leaders on the podium with King and led the congregation in the Lord’s Prayer.

It wasn’t until the Memorial Service for James Reeb, and the success in the courts to allow the Selma to Montgomery march to proceed that President Johnson was moved to introduce the Voting Rights Bill - in itself a revolutionary event that is slowly being undone as we speak in this country. That's what it took then... what will it take now?
The march to Montgomery was a milestone, but it was not an end to the work or the losses. Viola Liuzzo (who is also shown in the film, but not otherwise identified), was a part-time student at Wayne State University and wife and mother of five. She drove from Detroit to join the march, coming alone and despite her family’s protest. Telling her husband why she had to go, Viola Liuzzo said, “It’s everybody’s fight. There are just too many people just standing around talking.” Reeb used similar words: “It’s the kind of fight I believe in. I want to be part of it.” After the protest in Montgomery, she was driving some black protestors back to Selma when she was shot in her car by KKK members… and unwitting martyr to the cause.

Human beings like heroic stories. We are bolstered by stories of survival. We are moved by tales of hardship and struck by the stories of martyrs. To die for something... the ultimate sacrifice... to be killed for a cause. I grew up with stories of martyrs - the Catholics of my childhood thought it good for building up moral fiber. I found it horrifying, because it seemed so pointless. To die for this demanding God, to receive a reward in heaven? But these are different martyrs now.

Hymn #97 - the Thanksgiving Hymn We Gather Together has this verse:

*We sing of the freedoms which martyrs and heroes
have won by their labor, their sorrow, their pain;
the oppressed befriending, our ampler hopes defending,
their death becomes a triumph, they died not in vain.*

The "march" that is being commemorated today was really a series of actions, of protest and violent responses to those protests; of murderous acts and heroic deeds. It is the horrific background of this country's slow awakening to racism. And we Unitarian Universalists tend to view this through the lens of our own faith tradition's involvement. We count those who stood and marched - and those who died - and hold our heads up proudly. It is a mantle we have proudly claimed for 50 years... but we ought to wear it lightly.

Yet there is something more than commemoration that is asked of us. While we may be emboldened by Liuzzo and Reeb's witness, we must also remember their humility. They weren't there as the Unitarian Universalist icons they would become in death. They were simply human beings moved to action in response to brutality visited upon other human beings, and they became victims themselves. Their legacy and those of countless others live on.

Unitarian Universalist activism in Selma - involving hundreds of ministers and the violent deaths of Rev. James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo - put Unitarian Universalism face to face with its proclaimed beliefs in equality and justice and harmonious relationships among all peoples.

On the final day of the march, among the 30,000 assembled were about 500 UU lay people and about 250 UU ministers. Add to that the dozens who spent time with the Mississippi Summer Project, the Delta Ministry Project, and other efforts in the South afterward; those who led their communities’ response; and the dozen ministers who
participated in the UU presence in Selma through the summer of 1965. For many, the experience changed their lives. And it brought to the UUA a sea change in attitudes.

Yet in and of themselves, noble aspirations and heroic deeds cannot undo systematically embedded patterns. Mark Morrison Reed reminds us that after Selma, UUs preached more sermons about human rights, sang more freedom songs on Sunday mornings, and devoted more Sunday School classes to the situation of African Americans. But they sang the songs and preached the messages, by and large, in lily-white settings - now mostly in the suburbs. Without a doubt, Unitarian Universalists continued to participate in more protest marches and community action. But then the cause of civil rights and black empowerment seemed to lose out to other issues that more closely affected Euro-American UUs directly... the war in Vietnam and Women’s Liberation. The presence of African Americans in Unitarian Universalist congregations and the Association as a whole never increased to a degree were true equality would be a reality. Unitarian Universalism in practice, structure, and complexion remained out of sync with its espoused values.

Reverend Angus Cameron was a UUA Board member in 1965 - and he was also Minister of First Unitarian Church of Philadelphia. He was in Boston when word of Reeb’s death came. But rather than travel with the Board to attend Reeb's Memorial Service, Cameron returned here, to his church, to Philadelphia where he preached that Sunday.

"A long battle is ahead", he said. "A few dramatic incidents, the blood of martyrs will not end the war - nor make the crooked straight. What is needed is courage, yes, but also a quiet, continual persistence, and unremitting, relentless pressure." He ended his sermon by bringing the issue home to Philadelphia.

"Here in the North, we have not solved the underlying problem of our cities and towns... Here in Philadelphia they worry and do much worse if a Negro moves next door! The Reverend James Reeb saw through the sickness. Selma was just a place he went in order to protest it."

Lawrence McGinty, minister in Birmingham AL: "Nobody really cared or got upset about Jimmie Lee Jackson... for implicit in the response of the government and the people was just that "another negro [nigger]” was dead. “This is a white man’s country. Let's face it. And here is the evil lurking in all of us, all across the country, North, South, East and West”

The question was raised: did we react differently to the death of James Reeb from the way we reacted to others in a tragic succession of deaths in the American South? Reeb was a white man and a Unitarian more like us.

Intellectually, we may think we are ready for this new world we are called upon to make. But at heart we still have some fundamental adjustments to make. Some Unitarians were able to make that adjustment overnight in Selma 50 years ago. All of them came away saying they would never be the same persons again.
So somehow we have to let this tragedy of our time enter into our hearts until we can say that too. Mark Morrison Reed reminds us:

"We assume the overwhelming response to Selma was about a response to oppression, but in reality it was a consequence of relationship. We overemphasize moral courage but really it's all about relationship."

He suggests that to move forward, to cross the bridge that is before us now, we place must place ourselves in situations where relationship can evolve. Surely righteousness and the magnitude of injustice fueled the response 50 years ago - but it was the relationship that compelled them to act.

It is no different now... connection, one person to another. 'Placing the cause first can lead you astray; right belief cannot be placed before right relationship’ It is not “us-them” but we.

Yes, we need to remember and hold dear the sacrifices made by so many - and honor our fellow Unitarian Universalists who gave their all for this cause - and carry their memory forward and take pride in what they did and where their efforts led. But now a new call comes to us - from Selma this weekend, and from Ferguson and New York City and Philadelphia, and Texas and North Carolina, where voting rights are under attack. And it comes to us from the way a preference for a "law & order" focused police state seems on the rise again.

Today, the struggle for voting rights is needed more than ever. Opposition to police brutality is in full swing through rallies, vigils, and die-ins. The discussion of how black lives matter is a fight for justice for all that continues every day. But here is what President Barack Obama said yesterday, standing at the Edmund Pettus Bridge:

"What greater expression of faith in the American experiment than this; what greater form of patriotism is there; than the belief that America is not yet finished, that we are strong enough to be self-critical, that each successive generation can look upon our imperfections and decide that it is in our power to remake this nation to more closely align with our highest ideals?"

The bridges we are called to cross may not be as clearly identified, but if we can see what our lives ask of us ... we will step up to the task.

"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. All of us need to recognize, as they did, that change depends on our actions, our attitudes, the things we teach our children."

May the love and generosity of spirit that inspire us to live boldly and work for justice continue to give strength and hope to those who follow. And as another Unitarian Universalist hymn (#358, Rank by Rank Again We Stand) reminds us,

“what they dreamed be ours to do, hope their hopes, and seal them true.”

May this be our living legacy.
**Reading - Selma's Challenge** by Mark Morrison-Reed

In the early hours of Monday, March 8, 1965, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. dispatched a telegram that read:

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 of America.

No American is without responsibility. All are involved in the sorrow that rises from Selma to contaminate every crevice of our national life. The people of Selma will struggle on for the soul of the nation, but it is fitting that all America help to bear the burden.

I call therefore, on clergy of all faiths representative of every part of the country, to join me for a ministers’ march to Montgomery on Tuesday morning, March 9th.

In this way all America will testify to the fact that the struggle in Selma is for the survival of democracy everywhere in our land.

People converged on Selma: clergy and laity, men and women, blacks and whites, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, Protestants, Jews, Unitarian Universalists, and atheists. They came from across the United States and Canada.

The events of March 1965 in that county seat in Alabama’s Black Belt represented a pivotal moment in American history. For over three weeks, the unfolding drama held the world’s attention. It was a cultural upheaval in which hope confronted intransigence. Protest was met with fury. Violence begot sacrifice and suffering. Blood was spilled, and the slayings of Jimmie Lee Jackson, an African American activist, and James Reeb and Viola Liuzzo, two white UUs, triggered a transfiguration.

This twentieth-century continuation of the American Revolution was a spiritual battle that brought the country closer to the freedom proclaimed in the Constitution and granted by the Emancipation Proclamation, but reneged upon following the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

Unitarian Universalists did not know that Selma would become a pivotal moment in their own history. In the past, our religious forebears had stood on the brink of making a difference in racial justice, and had wavered. But not this time.

Called, sent, drawn, or compelled, hundreds responded. When they left there were two Unitarian Universalist martyrs in their hearts and there was conviction in their stride. They had been changed in ways their lives would reveal but which words could never quite capture.