

In 1965, Martin Luther King Jr. called all clergy from across the United States to join him for a march in Selma. Most of you know this story. Many of you may also know that a Unitarian minister named James Reeb traveled from Washington DC to attend the march, and went out to eat with three other Unitarian ministers at an integrated restaurant, and was attacked upon leaving the restaurant. Many of you may know that James Reeb received a blow to the head, that proved to be lethal. Not all of you know this story, and that's okay, but I know some of you do. Well, this morning I'm going to tell you a couple details about that event that I'm certain you didn't know.

First detail: Do you know why James Reeb died? It was not simply because he was attacked, and given a blow to the head. First, Reeb was taken to a white hospital to attend to his wounds. After the other ministers explained why he was unconscious and bloody, the hospital which served an all white population, refused to see him. A white hospital refused to see James Reeb, a white man because of what he represented - Possibility. Possibility for a new way of being with one another.

After this encounter, Reeb was taken to a black hospital, and the doctors tried to help Reeb as much as they could but they had nowhere near the resources to treat his condition. So he died there, in that hospital. I mention this crucial detail because it would be untrue to say that Reeb died solely by taking a blow to the head from attackers. He died from the blows he received later, which though he was unconscious at the time, proved to be more deadly. He was denied adequate attention and care. In that denial, he was denied not only his own life, but the inability to speak for himself. He was denied care that could've meant the difference between life and death.

Second detail: After Reeb's death in the hospital, Rev. Clark Olson was invited by Martin Luther King Jr. to meet him at his bunker in Selma, to discuss the role of Unitarians in the Civil Rights struggle. Clark Olson recalls being put in a large black car and driven in the dead of night to a remote location, a place King's leadership thought would be safe from bombing. Olson was invited to sit in a room, and moments later King arrived.

Olson recalled that he was surprised how small King was in real life. In his mind, he was a towering figure, but in person he was quite average. Olson recalled that King had soft hands when they shook, and there was a gentleness about him he didn't expect. King called to meet him following the death of James Reeb to see if he could help with making funeral arrangements or helping with a memorial service. He told Olson: I feel horrible that this happened to your colleague and friend. I would understand if all the Unitarians want to leave Selma. Olson said he replied to King with a statement that would define the rest of his ministry. He told King: "We're not going anywhere."

I had a similar moment recently. I was notified by a friend of the family of Matthew Burroughs this last week. You probably have heard about the reported death of Matthew Burroughs involving two Niles police officers, who shot him in his car unarmed. There are conflicting reports about whether the police acted in justifiable self defense, but based on the history of this kind of violence across the nation, there is understandable suspicion.

Anyway I received a call from someone close to Matthew Burroughs who said almost verbatim: “I heard that you would stand with us. We know you have supported other families in need, and we hope you would show up with us as we demand a rigorous independent investigation into the circumstances of Matthew Burrough’s death. I replied simply with: “You heard right. We’ll be there”

Allowing possibility can be that simple. “Yes, we’ll be there.” Possibility is our natural state. When we unburden ourselves of the things that are hollow and devoid of meaning, and allow our heart to open a little bit wider, we experience our natural state.

And yet this opening to possibility is more of an art than we might expect. If you notice the picture on your Order of Service you will see a pair of hands cupping water. It’s a lesson that the only way we can hold the water is by using a firm, consistent, but gentle touch. The water will spill out if we close our hands like a fist, and the water will fall through our fingers if our fingers are too far apart, and we are not firm enough.

I invite you to practice this art with me later this afternoon at a rally for Matthew Burroughs today at 3 pm. Activism that leads to a clenched fist: anger, blame, dehumanizing of other people is to spill the waters of possibility. This is not what we're doing this afternoon. The other extreme is to skip the rally all together. This is too loose, and it leaves our community without any tangible support.

When I was talking with a local organizer about the rally, she told me the greatest concern of Matthew Burrough's family is that only black people would show up. She said then the media would dismiss their entire presence. She was concerned that no white people would be present in solidarity.

King worried about that too. He worried constantly about how far white people would go understandably, because they would be volunteering to bear witness to hardships that they could afford easily to ignore. It's human nature, not a judgement.

Few of us go out of our way to volunteer to experience or bear witness to difficulty. Especially if that difficulty is optional for us, in the position we're in. This is why King said with full understanding and compassion: I understand if the Unitarians want to leave Selma, and go home.

Clark Olson's response not just through words, but through actions has defined the trajectory of our church: We're not going anywhere. The more we study what we imagine to be familiar, the more disorienting the familiar becomes.

When we look at each one of our lives, and try to find a sense of meaning and purpose, we are met with the frustrating assessment: we are created half to rise and half to fall. We are alike in ignorance. Chaos of thought and passion, all confus'd. The error of our ways is our grandeur. Our gravitas lies in jest. Our glory in riddles. To put it plainly, it is difficult to discern sometimes what we ought to do and when we ought to do it.

Allowing possibility is holding all this with a firm, loving and gentle touch. We are not here to play judge to others, or to play sole judge to ourselves.

We are here to show up where people need us. People who are brokenhearted. People who are confused and upset and in grief. We are here to stand with those who need support not so we can merely get the same support in return. No, the truth of this being with is much more profound. We are with those who need us when they need us, because we can. Because in doing what we can, we see more clearly who we are. And who we are is not something pithy and easily defined, but it's felt and it is known. We know when we are in the right place. We just know.

We hang between doubt to act or rest. And that doubt is our flame along this journey. Don't ever lose your doubt. To hang between act and rest, is to be with. We are with those we think are like us, and those we perceive as different. We live among both clarity and confusion, neglect and the bravest care.

We live between worlds every minute of our lives. Most of the time we don't even know where we are or why. We just are where we happen to have ended up. This is fine as far as it goes, but it fails to go far enough.

In making a decision about where to be, we set up the rest of our life. Our decision puts our life on a trajectory, a trajectory of possibility, which we will never fully be able to appreciate. There are few moments that call us to deep and present appreciation for the possibility that each of us is.

This is one of those moments. I don't believe we have to wait for tomorrow to discover possibilities that are up until now dormant or weighed down. Each of us houses this possibility. Each of us is that bird preparing to do what comes naturally: Fly and soar. You don't need special powers to soar like this. You don't need to take flying lessons. All you have to is unburden yourselves of the fears and limitations that have tied you down, and have made you something less than you are.

Being human is a grand privilege. Being human is confusing exactly because it's wondrous and beyond our perceived limitations. It is an honor that we can stand in body or more importantly in spirit with those who need a sense of the spirit in a time of death and grief.

"We'll be there." This is the statement that opens the door to the rest of our path. "We'll be there," fully in body and spirit.



In being there together, we sense the familiarity of our lives with more depth and context. We see that our life is much bigger than we typically imagine, and that our life includes the confusion and grief of this moment. To be human is to hold this confusion in our cupped hands, firm and gentle. We don't let it go, and yet we don't let it define us.

There is something else that defines us. It is a beauty that soars out from every piece of who we are. Nothing less, nothing left out. It is a beauty that connects the heartbreak of this moment directly to my soul. That is what it means to be there for those who seek what is holy - comfort, dignity, and justice. Our presence tells the complete story of who we are: you are connected to my soul.

So join me at the Niles Police Station at 3 pm to express this connection peacefully, and with a full heart for Matthew Burroughs and his family. I'll see you there.