



**NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN
UNIVERSALIST CHURCH**

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Freedom Riders

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There are two things I want to say before I begin. The first is that this is more of a lecture than a sermon. The second is that, by the end, you will have turned it into a sermon, because for this subject it's something we can only do together. Trust me, then see if you don't agree.

The worship theme of the month is Freedom, and today's is the sermon of the month. In observance of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday, it's an honor to pair celebrating this great American's life with one of the most remarkable historical accounts of the 20th century, the story of the Freedom Riders.

I'm going to tell you this story. But a story has to be about all of us in order for it to have meaning. The meaning of this story is that, in order for real change to happen - black and white, rich and poor, educated and non-educated, inner city and suburban - *all* have to collaborate and work together. The secret to a social movement's success is its diversity.

A few years ago, a brand new book about the Freedom Riders of the early '60s was published. It is the most thorough accounting of this stage of the Civil Rights Movement. Before I read this book, I didn't really know much about the Freedom Riders. I had a vague sense of buses and people singing in the south for freedom, but I had no idea these buses were in fact Greyhound buses. My hippie sensibility thought that the people had rented their own bus or something, and were gallivanting around the country, like Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters.

I've been surrounded by liberal education my whole life, and yet I didn't know. I realize many of you, in fact, *lived* through the Freedom Rides. Consider it, then, a visit to the past and a meditation on what these historical events meant.

So what is a Freedom Ride and who were the Freedom Riders? A Freedom Ride was an interstate trip on a Trailways or Greyhound bus. The Freedom Riders were a group of black and white people who would challenge the segregated code and sit where they weren't "supposed" to sit. At the different bus stations they stopped, the black riders would use white bathrooms and try to order food from white lunch counters, while the white passengers did the same on the black side. These folks were called the "testers" and there was always at least one "observer" in a group, who would follow the segregated code in case he or she needed to call for help after arrests were made.

It really is hard for me to imagine segregated Greyhound buses. I'm actually a Greyhound veteran myself - again, in the hippie sense. There was a time when I loved how cheap and easy it was to hop on a bus according to my schedule. I've taken some loooooong bus rides across the country. One of my favorite things about going Greyhound is meeting the variety of people in America. The drudgery of long trips creates a camaraderie between people and you make fast friends. I always appreciated the diversity of ethnicity and social location.

But the scene could not be any more opposite back in the early 60's and its wake. On June 3rd, 1946, there was a ruling of the Supreme Court, *Morgan Vs. The Commonwealth of Virginia*. A young black woman had been arrested for sitting in a white seat of a bus going from Virginia to Maryland. Most black people of the time who found themselves in this predicament would pay their jail bond and disappear. But not Irene Morgan. She took it all the way to the Supreme Court where it was ruled that the federal government had no laws about separating the races. They said, "It seems clear to us that seating arrangements for the different races in interstate motor travel requires a single uniform rule to promote and protect national travel."

Sounds good, right? But there were no provisions to make sure it was actually enforced; nothing changed. So this is what originally sparked the very first Freedom Ride, which took place in 1947, and included a Unitarian minister, Homer Jack. He was a founding member of CORE, which stands for Congress of Racial Equality - a grass-roots organization. The Freedom Rides was their brain-child. Jack also headed the Chicago Council Against Racial and

Religious Discrimination. This ride, called the Journey of Reconciliation, didn't amount to much, either - it was a loop from Washington DC through some southern states, but bypassed the deep south. It seems at the time, directly post-war, the country was too inert to make any changes where segregation was concerned.

It would take another 14 years before the first significant Freedom Ride took place. Almost all the Freedom Rides took place in 1961, the same year Unitarianism and Universalism joined forces. There were over 60 Freedom Rides in all, of varying size and impact, but for the sake of providing a snap shot I'm going to focus on the first one that struck ground.

CORE planned it, but many of them afterwards were organized by student groups. After the Montgomery bus boycott led by Martin Luther King, the ground was loosened for non-violent, direct action. These activists took the non-violent method very seriously, and it's a major point worth considering, amidst the abundance of violence in our world.

The code of non-violence for the Freedom Riders was religious. They trained for it, they studied Gandhi, they learned basic tenets. One of these tenets is to not cooperate with evil. Hence they go limp when physically attacked, since violence is seen as evil. And of course, the premise of the Freedom Rides was to not cooperate with the social evil of segregation.

The ride was to go from Washington DC to New Orleans, via the Deep South. Before disembarking, CORE alerted the Justice Dept, headed by Robert Kennedy, who alerted the FBI, who alerted the police in the states. This information wasn't as dear to any state as the state of Alabama. As the ride progressed, the riders encountered varying degrees of hostility, but they did move forward, so that by the time they reached Alabama they were emboldened by their success thus far.

It would be really easy at this point to completely slam Alabama; as I read about the complete collusion of local and state police, even the governor, with the Ku Klux Klansmen, it reminded me of the Rwandan genocide, and its hunger for blood. Heck, many of the police *were* the Klansmen. They had big plans for the Riders, which even the FBI director knew about. No one told the Riders.

Before I recount the details of the violence that unfolded, it's worth interjecting that this must be more a comment on human nature, than an attack on southern bigots. The idealistic hope for a peaceful and just world depends on our being able to empathize with those we hate, to offer them a higher path than the one they've offered you. To jeer at racist behavior sows the seeds of war, not peace. So as you hear about these details, be thinking of hate crimes that are closer to the present era. They are not as far and few between as we'd like them to be.

When the first bus of Freedom Riders reached the border town of Anniston in Alabama, there was an eerie quiet. Minutes later a huge angry mob of white supremacists surrounded the bus. There were two undercover FBI agents on the bus that prevented the mob from entering, and the mob took their rage out on the bus, slashing tires and breaking windows. The bus attempted to leave town, but flat tires forced the bus to stop. A bundle of burning rags thrown inside forced the passengers to exit and several suffered injury due to smoke inhalation.

One of the riders was approached by a white man who asked, "Are you all okay?" but before he could answer the man sneered and hit the rider in the head with a baseball bat. The bus threatening to explode dispersed the crowd somewhat, but many simply watched the helpless Riders who were in need of medical attention. One little townsfolk girl supplied the choking victims with water, and she and her family were later so ostracized for this act of kindness that they had to move out of the area. Despite that the police refused to call for an ambulance, eventually the injured riders made it to a hospital, but the doctors were in no hurry to treat them, and most of the black riders weren't even admitted. None of the interracial group was allowed to spend the night.

An hour later, what the second bus of Freedom Riders faced was even worse. A group of Alabama Klansmen boarded the bus in Atlanta. Once they reached Anniston, after the Riders purchased a few sandwiches, and got back on board, the bus driver announced, (and I have to warn you there is a racial slur in this quotation) "We have received word that a bus has been burned to the ground and passengers are being carried to the hospital by the carloads. A mob is

waiting for our bus and will do the same unless we get these niggers off the front seat." When the riders refused to move, the Klansmen severely beat up four of the Freedom Riders, nearly killing one. They piled the unconscious bodies on top of each other on a seat in the rear of the bus.

The bus driver and a police officer surveyed the scene and were satisfied with the restoration of Jim Crow seating arrangements. The police officer said to the Klansmen, "Don't worry about no lawsuits, I ain't seen a thing." The bus then proceeded to Birmingham, and the Riders could only hope the worst was over.

By the time they got there, the injured Riders had regained consciousness. They really had no way of gauging what they were up against; an FBI informant had made sure the policemen and Klansmen were ready to receive the bus at the Birmingham station. As they saw no weapons and it appeared no imminent threat existed, the Riders warily exited the bus to retrieve their luggage. The two designated "testers" for the Birmingham station were among the men who were severely beaten, a white man named Peck and a black man named Person.

Peck recalled the intensity of the scene in his 1962 memoir, "I did not want to put Person in a position of being forced to proceed if he thought the situation was too dangerous . . . but when I looked at him, he responded by simply saying, 'Let's go.'" What soon proceeded was a full-out riot, with many men getting seriously injured, including bystanders and journalists. Peck nearly didn't make it to the hospital in time to receive emergency surgery. When he spoke to reporters later from his bed, he could barely say in a whisper, "The going is getting tougher, but I'll be on that bus tomorrow headed for Montgomery." The reporters were stunned.

The local black minister Fred Shuttlesworth also surprised people when, later that evening to the united groups of Freedom Riders and local supporters, he declared, "This is the greatest thing that has ever happened to Alabama . . . When white and black men are willing to be beaten up together, it is a sure sign they will soon walk together as brothers."

Though it took a few years, these efforts eventually changed the segregation laws as well as the social mores that would most effectively enforce them. This non-violent, direct action gave courage to all the Civil Rights action yet to come in the quick-moving events of the 1960's. It was the Freedom Riders who sowed the seeds of change for this decade.

Nearly fifty years just isn't that long ago. Today, there are still cross-burnings that occur occasionally, and acts of violence against people of color in this country, whether they be African American, Latino, or Muslim. While racial tensions continue to be a problem, I want us to consider the longer view.

The challenges of poverty we face are enormous, black or white, and the economic disparity is increasing. But so much has changed so quickly in the past 45 years - whether we're talking about black rights, women's rights, or gay rights - and the accompanying social mores that reflect these changes, that those who fear inevitable progress are giving their all to one last shriek of disapproval. We see it in the hate crimes associated with the gay and lesbian community. They're giving their collective shriek extra decibels because there are just not as many of them. There are not as many as those who *have* lived through the changes, gone through an emotional process of changing their feelings, and have come out believing that such notions of equality are a given.

Most people have successfully adjusted to the social changes of the 60's.

But it's not over yet, we're not there yet, and I concede that some say we're not anywhere close, even with a black president.

If we want to seal the fate of racial equality, like Rev. Shuttlesworth said, we all have to get beaten up together a little bit, if only in a symbolic sense. We have to be as creative as the Freedom Riders and literally go out of our way.

To get beaten up together nowadays can look one of a hundred different ways. It could mean fighting a terribly unjust school system. It could mean demanding a fairer system of health care, working with at-risk youth, standing up to

derogatory racist or ethnic comments. This is *our* struggle, the American struggle for justice and equality for *all* her people.

I'm optimistic, and I'll tell you why. Think back on all the characters in this story. Some hateful people who colluded with police to attack, beat and sometimes murder other humans, some others who were weaker but braver. If you want to share my optimism, ask yourself this question: with whom did you identify? Who were your heroes? Who would you hope you could emulate if you were ever called to? When you answer these questions, you will have turned this lecture into a sermon.

May we be inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.'s call to non-violent action. It's a religious premise that can extend to many areas of our lives, the refusal to cooperate with evil. No one is free when others are oppressed, so therefore, there is still much work to do, and every person, no matter the background, has a role to play. In his memory and in his honor, let us continue to work for the dream that Martin Luther King had - for a more just and more peaceful world.