

We Shall Overcome
By Lisa Mitchell

It was a cold, clear Michigan day on March 7th as the members of the congregation at the First Unitarian Church of Ann Arbor clustered together in the crowded pews. I sat between my parents, listening with rapt attention as Reverend Gaede described the protest against voter registration that was occurring in the South, particularly Alabama. Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. had called for people to walk to the state capitol as a show of strength and solidarity for civil rights. People of all faiths and from all parts of the country were joining him. He asked all of us to keep their well being in our minds and in our hearts. We sang “We Shall Overcome” and it was thrilling and moving to feel a part of something so important, if only in spirit. We left the sermon energized and hopeful. In Selma, a far cry from the tranquility of Ann Arbor, Michigan, what had begun as a peaceful protest had erupted in horrifying acts of brutality and violence.

Sunday evening my father received a phone call. Without a word he turned on the television and sat in his chair, his brow furrowing behind the dark rims of his glasses. We stared disbelieving at the screen as the room was flooded with shocking images of people being beaten by the police, and knocked down by the force of water sprayed on them. Without a word we watched as innocent people, unarmed and peaceful, were clubbed to the ground, the blows battering their bodies like a torrential hailstorm. The sounds of painful, fearful screams, the sickening thuds of wood on flesh, the growling of dogs, and ugly, angry words ricocheted through the rooms of our quiet home. Without a word, we watched in horror as the nightmare of racism exploded into the living rooms of America.

The following Sunday, the mood inside the Unitarian church was somber and uneasy. A Unitarian minister, James Reeb, had been clubbed to death during the second march on

March 9th Reverend Gaede gripped the pulpit tightly and cleared his throat. His voice, usually so clear and reassuring, quivered with emotion as he called his congregation to action. Now, even more than before, it was important for us, as Unitarians, as people, to join with others against crimes of injustice. Reverend Reeb's death was an alarm call, an alarm ringing throughout the country calling for the awakening of the country's moral conscience. Who among our congregation would join him in answering this call? At home, my father began collecting his things in preparation for the long trip to Alabama.

I couldn't sleep the night before my father left for Selma. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw those terrible images of what was called "Bloody Sunday." The golden light seeping under my door flickered as my parents moved through the house, packing provisions for the journey. They spoke in stilted, muffled whispers. I stared at the ceiling surrounded by the fuzzy darkness of my room feeling helpless and miserable. Outrage and frustration seethed within me, bubbling deep inside my blood. I wanted to help, I wanted to fight, I wanted to cry out in anger. I wanted to scream until my vocal cords bled. I wanted to do something, anything to change the mad injustice I had witnessed in my fellow countrymen. But who was I? I was an eleven year-old girl, living in Michigan. I clenched my tiny, ineffective fist against my eyes and wept fiery, indignant tears.

The cacophony of laughing voices at school weighed on me as I walked through the school hallway, pressing in with its oppressive happiness and ignorance. It stood in such stark contrast to the horrors I knew to be occurring in Selma. It seemed wrong, and almost inhuman, for life in Michigan to be going on like normal, unchanged and unaffected by the events going on in the South. I trudged to my locker as the bell began to ring. I stood standing in front of it, listening to the droves of students shuffle past. I stood there, staring into the depths of it. I

stood there listening to the sound of the hurried steps of the last remaining stragglers. My feet refused to move. I couldn't go to class. I couldn't go through a normal school day with what I knew about Selma, Alabama. I couldn't pretend that nothing had changed.

I turned and headed to the school office, and told the school secretary that I was not going to classes. She asked me if I had a doctor's appointment or some other reason. "No," I told her, "I will be marching to Selma." She was uncomprehending. "I am going to spend the day marching outside the school. I am going to spend the WEEK outside the school. If I can't actually BE in Alabama with my dad, I'm going to be with him in spirit." I went straight to the art room, explained my plans to the art teacher, and fashioned a sign out of construction paper and a yardstick. On the paper I wrote the words "We Shall Overcome" in bold, black letters. I could feel the eyes of the other students on me as I walked out of the room and out to the front of the school. I looked straight ahead of me, focusing my attention on my protest and trying to ignore the fluttering of my nervous stomach.

I marched all morning, circling round and round the school. It was cold and lonely on my march, but with each step I could feel my confidence rising. Each step I took felt full of purpose; I fancied that every thud of every footstep somehow sent reverberations of energy to my father. For the first time in my life, I felt like my life was involved in a greater purpose. For the first time, I felt like my tiny body was affecting the world, not just being affected by it.

In the afternoon, I set aside my sign and re-entered school to get my lunch bag. I was greeted by the principal's secretary who informed me that I was needed in the office. I sat nervously in front of the principal, my eyes anxiously flickering to his face. I had never been called into the office before. I had always been a model student, quiet, respectful. I had never been a "trouble child." I listened meekly as he explained that I was violating school policy by

refusing to attend classes. I sat silently, with my head bowed as he explained that if I continued I would be suspended, and my parents would be informed. I could feel my certainty in my actions waiver. I had never been disobedient before. I had never disappointed my parents, or my school teachers. Then I thought of Selma. I thought of the people in the South who were disobeying the authorities there, because the authority was wrong. They weren't being disrespectful; they were fighting to gain respect. I looked up and met the gaze of the principal. I listened to him enumerate the consequences of my actions. I apologized to him for my disobedience, but I told him I couldn't go back to class. Not this week. This week I was marching to Selma.

Later that night, as I lay on my bed reading, I heard a knock at my door. My mother wordlessly entered my room and sat down next to me on the bed. Her brow furrowed with concern. "I got a call from the school today," she began, "they said you refused to go to classes. If you don't go back tomorrow, you'll be suspended." She looked at me, searching my face for a reason for my sudden disobedience. I calmly described the march I was taking, and why I couldn't bear to be inactive in the face of the injustices in the South. She listened without comment. Finally, she sighed. She reached up and smoothed the errant locks out of my face. "Go ahead," she told me, "if it's something that you believe is right, do it. We'll live with the consequences. And right now, all my worries are with your father." Her eyes were shiny with tears and pride.

The second day of my Michigan march I was surprised to find a few of my classmates waiting at my locker. One of them was carrying a sign similar to mine. I smiled as we walked wordlessly out to the front of the school. The next day, our numbers had grown. The marchers grew to twenty over the next few days. We carried signs and we sang "We Shall Overcome."

Sometimes we talked about the news from the real march but often, we just walked in silence. In the silence our unity of purpose was almost palpable. Even though we were only a few junior high and senior high school students, we were strengthened by a goal that was grander than ourselves. We were no longer children. We were protesters.

By the end of the week, we were informed that no actions would be taken against us. The principal had decided not to suspend us. The teachers had rallied behind us, giving us our homework assignments after school to finish at home. They felt that were learning more about injustice and democracy marching in front of the school than we could ever glean from a textbook. We continued to march, our numbers growing more with each day.

When Reverend King's speech in Montgomery was broadcast, I strained to see my father in the crowd, but it was impossible. By the time that the march had reached Montgomery, the number of people marching had grown from a couple of thousand to 25,000. Just knowing that my father was somewhere in that sea of people made me feel indescribably proud. In some way, I felt as though I was there too, standing up for justice and equality.

My father's homecoming was joyous. My mother and I listened to him describe the fears as he and the others marched along the highway to Montgomery. He told us about the people who lined the route, shouting threats and ugly words. He talked about the feeling that violence could erupt at any moment. But mostly, he recalled the sense of solidarity and goodwill of his fellow marchers: walking the long road with his arms linked through the arms of strangers, singing songs of peace and unity, sharing meals with strangers in small churches along the way. When I told him about the march I had coordinated his eyes filled with pride. He smiled and kissed me on my forehead. For the first time, my father and I were connected in

a way my mother could never understand. We had both marched to Selma and returned victorious. Outside my bedroom door, I heard my mother calling us to supper.

Around another dinner table, not far away in Detroit, another family gathered in grief. Like my father, Viola Liuzzo had heeded the call to join the march, but she never returned to her family. She was shot twice in the head as she drove marchers to the airport. My father had been lucky. He had endured hardships greater than I had imagined. He and Viola Liuzzo, and people like them, had put themselves in danger in order to right a grave wrong. Many had been sacrificed to remedy the injustices being perpetrated by the government. And many more had walked triumphantly, both in Selma and in Michigan, united in song: “deep in my heart, I do believe, that we shall overcome someday.” We had all brought about that day with the simple act of many determined feet on pavement, marching in unison and a common goal. We had fought a war with moral certitude as our only weapon. And we had won.