

FEBRUARY 12, 2012

"REMEMBERING WHO WE ARE"

Reading from "Ten Years in a Free Pulpit," by Rev. John Cummins-

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A sermon preached at the end of 1972, reflecting on the first decade of Rev. Cummins' ministry at First Universalist Church, 1963-1973.

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"This was a decade that began with the assassination of our President, and ended with losing the most ignominious and shame-filled war in our national experience; it was also a decade in which our nation addressed itself for the first time to the true implications of race, peace, and the integrity of our national purpose; that witnessed the winding down of the cold war, the entrance of China into the United Nations, and the landing of human beings on the moon....."

"One of my great dreams in coming to Minneapolis was to build a new church, way out on the growing southwestern rim of the metro-area, about where the Radisson South is today; a building that would be truly representative of a Universalist Faith in the 20th Century, perhaps one of Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes, in transparent plastic, a miniature universe, adorned with the symbols of many religions and the artworks and aspirations of all cultures and modern science, that would sum up all human experience and show....what a 20th Century World Religion could be. That dream, at least the physical part of it, was never to be. It died when a little-known Unitarian minister by the name of James Reeb was slain on the streets of Selma, Alabama.

"Each of us has a moral threshold...beyond which no power on earth can compel us to go, and conversely, a moral ignition point at

which we are compelled to act, no matter what the consequences. Such a time came for me on a Saturday in March 1965, when I decided to go to Selma to attend the funeral of my fellow minister, James Reeb, at Brown Memorial Chapel at Selma, and to march to Montgomery with Martin Luther King. Every Unitarian Universalist minister who could walk or crawl, made a similar decision.

"The media got hold of this decision and television cameras appeared in church the next morning as I explained to the congregation what I was going to do.... The congregation was magnificent that day. Over \$1500 was donated for the James Reeb Memorial Fund. The money was used to rebuild a little church in the deep south where five little girls were slain as they attended Sunday School. Their families were also aided and their brothers and sisters given scholarships. Our Church Board later gave an additional thousand dollars to help Mrs. Reeb raise her children, as she is doing today in Montana.

For myself, the experience at Selma was a reaffirmation of our liberal tradition, and I will never forget the indelible scenes there as we faced barbed wire enclosures and armed sheriff's deputies, the bravery and compassion of adults and children alike, six-hundred of us marching to the barricades and to justice, armed only with prayer and a flag of the United Nations.

"My only hot meal in five days was in the delivery room of the Catholic Mission Hospital, where a priest invited me to the say grace, and none in my life was ever more sincere. On my return to Minneapolis over twenty-two thousand high school students heard from me about the watershed of Selma, the great turning point in our national awareness.

"So my earlier dream died for good cause and the congregation established new priorities and put its money into things other than bricks and mortar. TCOIC (Twin Cities Opportunities Industrialization Center) came to be a federally funded vocational training program, but its first hundred dollars came from First Universalist Church.

Not all the events surrounding this pulpit happened in a full church. George Crocker, a gentle Quaker lad whose family had long been members of this congregation, sought asylum here as a Conscientious Objector. He seated himself on the chancel steps in our empty church, to wait for the Federal Agents who sought to arrest him. My conversation with the Federal Agents ran as follows.

They: "Send him out."

Me: "When hell freezes over and not even then. This is a place of conscience. The person does not live who would be refused sanctuary as long as I am minister here."

They: "We want to come in and get him."

Me: "As I said before, the door is always open."

They: "There might be some violence. You wouldn't want your church to get wrecked, would you?"

Me: "Well, I don't know about you fellows, but George is committed to nonviolence!"

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Four years and 500 Conscientious Objectors later, the draft appears to be coming to an end and amnesty is at least debatable.

In the worst of times, we have believed in the best of things, and have done what was possible with our resources."