

Moses and the King
February 8th, 2009

You've got to be carefully taught. OK. I don't think I can let this song go uncommented upon before moving on to what I was planning to say today. The weird juxtaposition of its plucky melody and waltzing rhythm against its eerie, sardonic message of needing to learn how to hate, before it's too late, leaves me spinning a little, as if I'm being led in that very waltz by a dancer who's saying to me, keep dancing, keep spinning—who's saying this to me so that, in the end, I will be too disoriented to do anything but laugh dizzily at that strange little song, then maybe brush it aside, out of my mind.

But the song was chosen to be sung today, intentionally, because it does throw us off guard. It does demand that we examine how we *do*, at times, go waltzing about in our own lives, having been carefully taught if not hatred, perhaps

separation; if not consciously, perhaps subconsciously; if not outright fear, perhaps a subtle anxiety, about the space—or feared lack of it—between ourselves and those we have learned to see as other.

What does that space look like, and how have we been taught to react to it? We each need to examine this in our own lives, in our own travels through this community that we share with the strangers we pass each day. And I will get us to that. For now, though, I want to take you to another place in order to examine this issue of space. Being that this month is Black Heritage Month, I want to take you to a place I'm imagining many of our minds may first travel to when we think of such history, and that's the Deep South.

But rather than us all getting in our cars and driving, I'd ask that we get there by turning to the photograph that is on the cover of this morning's order of service. I know it's pretty

faint, a little hard to see. But the story it tells—the hundreds of individual stories and the one huge story it tells about people, and the space between them—is vivid and sharp, painfully and poignantly so. This particular photograph shows a solitary older African American woman walking toward the courthouse in Greenwood, Mississippi, to *try* to register to vote. On the steps, to her right and to her left, are clusters of white men, some with their backs turned to her, some with their eyes on her, as she approaches. It's 1963. The photo doesn't say who the woman was, who was standing behind the camera, or behind her, cheering her on, or leering at her. It doesn't state whether she was successful in her efforts, or what she had to go through if she was. It doesn't say how the space felt as she neared the men, passed them by.

But it does provide a window into history—African American history, United States history, political history, the

history of a people struggling—a people, as psalm 126 says, who for so long sowed in tears, but with sacrifice and forbearance, with determination and proclamation, have gradually come to “reap with shouts of joy.”

This photograph in other words, is a snapshot of struggle, of perseverance, of those seeking justice again and again in the face of injustice, and triumphing, in the end, for their divinely given right to take up space, to participate as full and equal members of the society they live within.

Now some of these very people who struggled so hard for their rights were led by a man named Moses. Admittedly, during his time as a civil rights leader in Mississippi, Robert Parris Moses himself grew so tired of people comparing him to that other, Old Testament Moses, that for a while he actually dropped his surname entirely.

But Bob Moses, whether he saw himself as a prophetic leader, guiding people out from a kind of 20th century slavery, or as the quiet organizer he wished to be, Bob Moses *did* play an essential role in guiding the people of Mississippi out from oppression, out from the brutal racial injustice that had plagued the South since the days of Reconstruction and beyond, and it is his presence and how he worked with others I'd like to uphold here now.

As we heard earlier from Anna, during the civil rights movement Moses never received the same recognition that other African Americans leaders did. (As a side note to that, I'll say that while I'd originally intended to compare Moses' leadership to Martin Luther King's in this sermon, as its title indicates, it was Moses alone, and his alternative style of leadership, that became my focus.) Moses was quite all right with not being in the limelight. The more he worked in the

South, the more his philosophy became, in the words of civil rights organizer Ella Baker, “instead of having a leader-centered group, you should have a group-centered leadership.” As Moses himself said after working in the movement for some time, “You could... get together 10 or 20 people and out of their getting together and giving them a chance to talk about their main problem would come programs they themselves decided upon.”

So you won't hear of any fiery speeches from Moses, nor will you see him standing before hundreds of followers. Moses' time was spent mostly huddled with others in anonymous kitchens, sitting on the porches of poor tenant farmers, and standing outside the doors of courthouses like the one in Greenwood, Mississippi, supporting those, like the woman in the photograph, determined to register to vote.

A northerner from New York City, Bob Moses arrived in the South in 1961 to work with SNCC, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee. SNCC had recently captured national attention through such courageous actions as student sit-ins, and the integrated interstate bus rides known as the freedom rides. But as courageous and creative and eye-opening as these actions were, Moses had his heart set on the simple act of helping the African American citizens of Mississippi to empower themselves through voter registration. While Moses was central in other efforts such as the Freedom Schools and all that went on during what came to be known as Freedom Summer, the core of his vision was, quote, “one man, one vote.” (And, judging by the photo we have, I assume he also meant, one woman, one vote.)

It would not be easy. Moses’ biographer Eric Burner writes, “Voter registration would have to be slow and

plodding...particularly in Mississippi, where only five percent of voting-age blacks had been allowed to register.”

In fact, in the four years that Moses lived and worked in Mississippi, the path to voter registration was obstructed again and again, in myriad calculating ways, by those in power—those who had been carefully taught, as the song says, to hate who their relatives hate. For instance, as Eric Burner notes, “state legislators enacted into law a policy [that stated that] all new registrants’ names had to be published two weeks in advance of acceptance. Current registered voters would be allowed to *object* to the moral character of potential registrants.” Other examples Burner notes: “A black employee in Ruleville was told he would be laid off because his wife had registered to vote, two black cleaning establishments were closed for violating vague city ordinances, and a church

allowing voter registration training classes lost its tax exempt status and no longer received free water.”

Despite these, and other, much more violent, sometimes murderous efforts on the parts of Southern whites, Bob Moses would not be deterred. Working with native Mississippians like “fieldhand-turned activist” Fannie Lou Hamer; organizing with others to bring down northern college students to help in his efforts; and demanding of officials from the federal government that they ensure black citizens’ rights, Moses worked resolutely onward. One victory came in January of 1964, when the Justice Department ruled that the registrar of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, must enforce registration laws “strictly, without regard to race.” Hattiesburg thus became the site of a Freedom Day event that included both voter registration and food drives. The event also brought in over fifty white clergymen to stand by as witnesses while Black citizens attempted to

register. Of course, for every witness from outside Mississippi, there were that many people to take their stories back to their home states, and thus increase national attention toward the efforts of Moses and those he was working with.

Moses' crowning effort, however, came after he concluded that the Southern Democratic Party was determined to fortress itself against potential black voters, no matter how hard they tried to join. Thus, in April 1964, Moses helped found the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, which, as some of you may remember, would make its presence known at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. Although the MFDP, as it came to be known, was denied seats for all but two of its sixty-eight member delegation (an offer which the delegation declined), and though Moses and others ultimately felt betrayed by President Lyndon B. Johnson for his eagerness to reach such a "compromise" rather than demand their right to

a full presence at the convention, the MFDP's presence goes down as a historical moment in the effort to move civil rights in this country forward.

Sadly, after the struggle and the subsequent defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to engage fully in the democratic process, Moses began to become disillusioned, and faded away from the movement, and even the country.

However, years later, in the late 1970's, he re-emerged in Boston, Massachusetts, establishing what he called The Algebra Project. The project's purpose was to teach mathematics to inner-city youth. "Its workings," states Eric Burner were "not far removed from the methodology [Moses] employed in Mississippi." He goes on to say that "The essentials of the Mississippi organizing tradition have their likeness in this new project: families put to the work of organizing; the empowerment of local people and their

recruitment for leadership, and finally... draw[ing] on the resources of your own community, and deal[ing] with its particular needs and issues.”

Drawing on the resources of your own community, and dealing with its particular needs and issues. Remember how I said earlier that I would bring us back to an examination of our own lives, and the space between ourselves and others? As much as it may sound like I’ve delivered a history lesson this morning more than a sermon, I don’t tell stories about people like Bob Moses for the lesson of history alone. Now comes the *religious* application to the story.

The 126th psalm, which we heard Justin read earlier, says, “Restore our fortunes, O Lord.... Those who go out weeping, bearing the seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy....” Abraham—admittedly not the one of the Old Testament, but the one of the 16th presidency—said “Our

reliance is in our love of liberty; our defense is in the spirit which prizes liberty as the heritage of all people in all lands everywhere. Destroy this spirit, and we have planted the seeds of despotism at our own doors.”

What seeds shall we, as a religious people, sow: the seeds of solidarity and struggle, or the seeds of insulation and separation? We have come a long, long way since the days of Abraham Lincoln, when some were far too willing to “shift their share of the burden onto the shoulders of others...” through slavery. We have come a long way from the days of segregationist Mississippi, when the privileged few denied the masses the right to vote. So, having come this far, having been *untaught* those ways, what now shall we be carefully taught?

Yesterday morning, at an economic summit organized by Austin Interfaith and attended by city council members, business leaders, church leaders, educators, and the mayor,

we had the honor of hearing longtime community organizer Ernesto Cortes speak to us about this very question. And here is what I came away with Mr. Cortes wanting us to be taught. He said, simply: “Any prosperity that doesn’t serve the least of its people is a false prosperity.”

Any prosperity that doesn’t serve the least of its people is a false prosperity. Now of course there is the question of just how prosperous our society is right now, and that’s largely why the economic summit was called. But right behind that question of dwindling prosperity is the question of rising fear, and with that fear comes a tendency to move from such righteous notions as “one man, one vote” to less noble ones such as “every man for himself.”

As a community not of fear, but of faith, we here at Wildflower Church must now, more than ever, assert our faith—the faith that calls us to affirm and promote justice,

equity, and compassion in human relations, that calls us to affirm and promote the right of conscience and the use of the democratic process. We can amplify and multiply our efforts in seeing these principles through by following the models of organizers like Bob Moses, as well as Ernesto Cortes, who believe in the power of the people themselves to lift up their voices for the justice that is their divinely given right. Our work with Austin Interfaith in particular is a vehicle by which we can do this. The more we join people across racial, class, geographic and religious lines—the more we share our common space, rather than vie against each other for it—the greater the opportunity we have to create in this community not a false prosperity, but an authentic one. The more we sow the seeds of interdependence together, the greater our chances to harvest a prosperous community of peace and justice.

So I ask you to remember our mission, that we are committed to transforming ourselves and the world around us through acts of compassion, love and social justice. I ask you, when you receive a call from a member of our Wildflower Austin Interfaith team to meet for an individual meeting, or to attend the upcoming accountability session in April, to say yes. I hope too that when you read about the Unitarian Universalist conference, Leading Congregations into a Multiracial, Multicultural Future, you will say yes to attending with other Wildflowers and myself. If our mission is true, if our principles are true, this is the work we are called to do. It is the work we've got to be carefully taught.

Amen.

#368 Now Let Us Sing