



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister  
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

---

## “The Little Boy”

© by the Reverend Mark Morrison-Reed

A sermon delivered on November 20, 2016

At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts

*Out of suffering have emerged the strongest souls;  
the most massive characters are seared with scars.* Kahlil Gibran

*As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways in which I could  
respond to my situation – either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering  
into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course.* Martin Luther King, Jr.

*Do not judge me by my successes, judge me by how many times I fell down and got back up again.*  
Nelson Mandela

### Sermon, Part I - Hiking in the Alps

Once upon a time in a land far away and a time long ago for some and not so long ago for other,  
that is to say June 1965.

A week before I turned sixteen, I was on the final leg of a six-day hike—my last before leaving the  
progressive Swiss boarding school I had attended for two years. Anxious to get back and finally  
take a shower, we strode along. It was a steep climb. Our clothes were dusty, our backs sweaty,  
our faces grimy and we smelled like cows. What else would we smell like after hiking for six days  
and sleeping in alp huts at night?

I was marching beside Jack. Our determined pace carried us passed the Schrädli, a cluster of three  
farmhouses that marks half way. There the path narrowed as it passed through a large stone wall.  
A little Swiss boy stood in this gap, pop-eyed, mouth wide open. In all likelihood he had never  
seen a real live “black” person before. As we came closer he turned, cried *Mutti, Mutti!* [Mother]  
and ran.

I can no longer remember exactly what else he said, probably *einer Schwarzer*. What was clear  
was that he was scared and fleeing from me.

Jack crowed, "Man, look at him go!"

I yelled *Fürchte dich nicht*. [Fear not], and then *Hab keine Angst* [Don't be afraid]. But on he

sped. Perhaps it was some story he had heard. There were many. I might have been "Black Peter"—St. Nicholas' companion who visited bad little boys and girls. I might have thought I was the devil. They all knew Satan was black. Or perhaps it was some primal fear of the unknown that drove him; I would never know. But there could be no doubt that he was terrified, and although I had done nothing except be there and be black I felt guilty. Unable to bear watching his frantic scramble up the trail, I lowered my eyes. When I looked up again I was relieved to see he'd reached his mother. She stretched out an arm, and his head jerked as she slapped his face. He whimpered. She dragged him aside, then turned her face away as I passed. Heedless of her shame I glared without speaking. My own mother would have scolded me if I'd done as that child had, but I so strongly identified with the little boy that all I saw was hardheartedness. As I redoubled my pace the focus of my indignation suddenly shifted. Why should I have to feel bad about myself, about who I am, and the color that is my birthright? In that moment of anger I saw that something was wrong with the world and from that feeling came a realization: the world must change! I think it was then that I promised myself I would try. The determination was there, but the means? That was another matter. As I brooded about the state of the world, I couldn't imagine that before the end of July I would be marching on the streets of Chicago.

## **Sermon, Part II – Marching in Chicago**

In Chicago during the 60s the Chatham Avalon Community Conference was one of the local organizations that formed the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCO) in its efforts to remedy the problems triggered by school segregation—overcrowding and the prefabricated classrooms the Chicago Board of Education had placed in playgrounds and called an answer; the low expectations which white teachers had of black students; and increasing segregation as 'white flight' continued. As Co-chair of the Schools Committee of the Conference, my father was deeply involved. My mother was as well.

Looking back from 2016 we would like believe that white UUs would be behind this effort. At the First Unitarian Society of Chicago my mother, having just return from a year in Switzerland, spoke at a congregational meeting. First she said that when Europeans asked about discrimination in the US she was proud of the headway being made. But now she found "the white liberals in her own church rationalizing and equivocating... [and with tears in her eyes, she asked]" them to support the school boycott. (A Decisive Decade, Robert McKersie, p.55)

In those days the Superintendent of Schools was Benjamin Willis and he was committed to keeping the school system segregated. A group of parents hired an attorney and sued. The settlement established "The Advisory Panel on Integration of the Public Schools." Its report said that 84 % of black students and 86% of the whites attended essentially segregated schools, subsequently no progress was made in implementing its recommendations. There had been two school boycotts called Freedom Days. When these prove of little avail and Willis was reappointed the next step in getting rid of Ben Willis and bringing the Board of Education to negotiate was to march.

There were marches before but now Dr. King was coming to Chicago. As the day of the march

approached my brother, Philip, and I spent our time making posters and distributing flyers. Monday, July 26 came. Ten thousand gathered in Grant Park. As the marchers surged ahead I hovered close to Dad – there had been some arrest at earlier marches. We headed toward City Hall chanting, “Ben Willis must go! Ben Willis must go!” And in the canyon between Chicago's skyscrapers that chant became a roar. Heat radiated from everywhere: the sun, the asphalt, the people, and the speakers—whom I couldn't see through the crowd even when standing on tiptoe. The rally went on and on and on. Trapped in the throng with Dad on one side and Philip on the other, boredom and discomfort replaced enthusiasm. Then I noticed Philip's face and the intensity of his attention. He couldn't see either but was riveted by the voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. so I shut my eyes and focused on King's voice anew.

I grew up in a household in which when someone asked on the telephone “May I speak to your mother or father?” I answered “Sorry, they're at a meeting.” Ours was a home in which adults talked politics and it was a treat to be allowed to stay up late to watch the Democratic and Republican conventions. My parents were activist and by the time I was ten years old my job was leafleting our neighbor for the Independent Voters of Illinois – I suspect I was a draftee rather than a volunteer. I grew up believing I could make a difference and should, but not until after that moment on the mountain did I do more than mimic my parents' behavior.

A year passed. The summer of '66 was spent working in a camp for international understanding (I'd return there three more times); soon I was marching on the Pentagon against the war in Vietnam; at age 19 I spent a year and a half as a VISTA volunteer doing tenant organizing on the west side of Chicago before being sent to do youth work in a poor community in Columbus, Ohio. There the young men I was supposedly helping taught me a lot. After Donna, my wife, and I were called to First Universalist in Rochester N.Y., I served on the Monroe County Human Relations Commission and chaired its Police Community Relations Task Force; when Tim Mains, who is gay, ran for the City Council in 1985 and was attacked by the religious right I became part of a clergy group that supported him; I sat on the UUA Committee on Urban Concerns and Ministry and chaired the Department of Ministry Affirmative Action Task Force. After being called to the First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto in 1988, I became the President of Family Service Association of Metropolitan Toronto and helped implement its Multi-Cultural Access report and later shepherded it through an amalgamation with the Toronto Counseling Center for Lesbians and Gays.

Along the way I learned many lessons; some as powerful, poignant and painful as watching the little boy flee up the mountain. I learned how seductive social action can be; how it can be as much about ego-preening as it is justice-seeking. How we all, but particularly ministers, use helping others to feel good about ourselves. I learned that its charity until you can authentically was and feel *we* rather than *them*, and work *with* rather than *for*. I learned how easily we turn into a moralist who need the moral fix and get high off doing good and being righteous. I learned about social action bullies who can't be bothered to treat other people with respect and dignity and will run over, or turn on you, in an instant; better get out of the way because the cause is all that matters. I learned that building a consensus is as important as being right, and that you've probably done a good job if ideologues on the right and the left are condemning you.

I keep learning. March of 2004 I returned to Switzerland and the boarding school and the *wanderweg* that runs between Goldern on the mountainside and Meringen in the valley. It hadn't been on my mind when I set out, but when I came to the turn in the path where long ago the little boy had fled from me in terror—for in his mind's eye, I—a gawky African American youth—must have loomed up like a dreadful, black bogeyman marching after him with my dirty band. When I reached that place I stopped, sat down on a stone wall, looked, remembered and began to weep and then sob and continued until my black sweater was shiny where the damp streaks ran down. The only other noise was a stream cascading in the distance.

In hindsight I could see that had been a moment of grace. For 50 years that promise has lived within me as I have worked to end racial oppression and the fear that prejudice feeds upon. I could have raged at the world. I could have cursed that day and hated the moment that small but wrenching incident had happened. But bad things happen and injustice persists. They are inevitable. Buddhism's first Noble truth is that life is suffering. What is important, and often all we have control over, is how we respond. The challenge is to accept the pain of life and make meaning of it.

I walked a little farther down the path and looked back up this gravel path I'd tread a 100 times before; then I retraced my track looking for the place that widened a little, the place where the Mother might have stepped aside to wait for her son. By a culvert it did widen a little. There, upon that spot next to the barbed wire, I knelt, placed my hand on the ground, and prayed, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you." Somehow I had taken that moment and that promise and used it to feed a lifetime of work. I wrung meaning from a heart-wrenching event. That long ago moment had strengthened me, clarified the nature of the problem and created a rage and resolve to fuel my effort. That spot became hallowed ground for me once I had learned to be thankful for the difficulties, challenges and pain life bestows.

I continued down the path and around a bend. Then I caught a flash of orange in the woods. I looked up. It was a little boy. He stared at me and I smiled at him. He stopped, climbed under the barbed wire fence and sped across the pasture. I assumed he was taking a short cut to the farmhouse below. But when I saw him run down and out the driveway to that farm I realized that he had been scurrying around me. A moment later as I passed this beet-cheeked, pouting little boy I nodded and greeted him. *Grüssi*. Getting no response, I sighed and kept walking.

This time it was different. This time I didn't carry the little boy away as a wound or rage but rather as a curiosity and a sadness and the knowledge that there is still much to be done. I have learned that you have to transform events, as Nelson Mandela did, by transforming yourself. Mandela could have been bitter after all those years in prison and yet he came out a person who spoke as compassionately about the jailer as he did about those living in poverty or with HIV/AIDS.

The hardest lesson isn't about saving the world, that's only the most obvious one. The hardest lesson isn't about doing the right thing no matter how noble. The hardest lesson isn't about doing anything. It is about *being*. It is about how you are in the world; the inner transformation that informs, inspires and sustains your actions. It is learning to cultivate compassion—compassion for

the impoverished and for the jailer, for the little boy and his mother, for me and most importantly you, yourself. In the end compassion requires self-acceptance—and that includes accepting our own rage and despair, neediness and ego-centrism. Unitarian Universalism’s first principle - what is it? The inherent worth and dignity of every person, does not have qualifiers attached to it. It doesn’t say we affirm only the inherent worth and dignity of the disinherited, or the do-gooders or the progress left or the politically correct. The worth of each of us does not need to be earned. The affirmation is universal and leads directly to the seventh principle (the rest to my mind being commentary); respect for the interdependent web of all existence. Which is to say, we *all* have inherent worth and we *all* are connected. When these are no longer affirmations we utter but a knowledge we carry in our hearts a compassionate way of being in the world will flow as freely from each of us as water cascading down a mountain brook.

Mark D. Morrison-Reed

November 20, 2016

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. Did something in your childhood direct you towards your life’s work or commitments? Share.
2. Share a time you felt broken by something. Did it lead to a personal transformation, and if so, how did that change take place?
3. What in your life are you particularly grateful for? How do you share your gratitude?
4. What role does social activism play in your life? What calls you to act for justice or prevents you from acting?