

Hewing a Stone of Hope
A Response to Gordon Gibson' s paper: Go Tell it On The
Mountain...

Ohio River Group, 2014
by Emily Gage

Every time I read the title to Gordon' s paper, I started singing in my head and sometimes out loud. This is a favorite hymn of mine, and, theologically speaking, I much prefer it cast as a freedom song. Born in 1968, I am so mindful of all the hard and good work of the freedom movement that helped create the world that I grew up in and live in now. It is from that historical perspective that I write, as well as one who oversees faith development for our young ones in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, and as the white parent of an African-American child. I greatly appreciate Gibson' s nine-step framework for moving in the right direction. In times of crisis or uncertainty, I always turn to a guide with only four steps: Show Up. Pay Attention. Tell Your Truth. Let Go of the Outcome. I hoped this framework would provide some order to the complicated (and personal) issue of race.

Show Up.

I grew up in the Pittsburgh Public School system, and began first grade in 1974. I could have gone to the neighborhood school, but my parents, instead, chose to bus me across town to a predominately African-American neighborhood to East Hills Elementary School, where I spent five happy years. It was an "open classroom" magnet school, and my remembrance is that I was—all five years—only one of a handful (some years larger than others) of white kids in my class. Many, though not all, teachers were African-American, and Mrs. Wade, the principal, an African-American woman, was perhaps the most dignified woman I had ever met. The curriculum and the atmosphere in general was very celebrative of African and African American culture and history. In first grade, we learned to count in Swahili, and I breathed and lived the stories of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. (and other African American leaders) over and over again. We sang "We Shall Overcome" on a regular basis, and our school theme song (which I can still sing) asked us to reach out and touch someone in brotherhood. Each December, we celebrated Christmas and Hanukkah and Kwanzaa. I continue to be

grateful for the experiences that were part of East Hills Elementary School. While I lived on one block my whole growing up life, my horizons were always wide open in many ways.

Growing up, I thought this was normal—that everyone learned what I learned and had racially mixed experiences in school. I see now, though, that this was a choice my parents made. A choice to show up to a particular vision of education and opportunity for me and other young people. A choice to show up to make real hard work that had led to this possibility. I was one of the oldest kids in our neighborhood, and almost every family on our block also ended up sending their kids to East Hills. Their/my showing up made it possible for others.

Poring through the archives of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette just these past weeks, I discovered that East Hills Elementary was a long promised school for an affordable housing community built in the early 60s. When it opened in 1972, the city and school officials hoped that enough white people would sign up voluntarily to integrate the school so that forced bussing would not have to take place. They did. In an article from the Post Gazette dated May 17, 1976 (my second grade year), the paper noted in a feature on the school: “For Jimmy, and probably a good many of the 140 whites and 423 blacks, at East Hills, education means more than just the three Rs.”

I think sometimes of all the hard work that so many did to make so much of my life (granted, as a middle class white person, but also as a woman in a same sex marriage and as the parent of an African-American son) what it is today. I am so grateful. And I think of how we show up to honor that and continue to make it real. My family now lives in Oak Park, Illinois, a village connected to Chicago by mass transit and proximity that has worked intentionally to build and maintain economic and racial diversity. Unlike Pittsburgh, its eight elementary schools are diverse as neighborhood schools. (School matriculation is based on where you live.) Hatch Elementary, where my son will attend in a couple of years, has 348 kids: 55% white, 28% African American, Asian 3%, Hispanic/Latino 4%, two or more races 9%. The K-8 district has 5820 students, with Hatch mirroring the demographic breakdown of the whole district. (Oak Park District 97 website, statistics for 12-13) In addition, there is a stated commitment to multicultural education, the purpose of which is to: “emphasize the importance of cultural competence in a democratic

society; enhance cross cultural relationships; and promote cultural understanding and respect for each other.” (Oak Park District 97 website) My family is here, in the village, in part because I serve the UU congregation in Oak Park, but more because (in being able to choose) we—two white women with an African-American son—are not the only family that looks like ours. Here is a place where groundwork has already been laid for strong relationships and valuing of diversity. And those before us have made it that way; we try to carry that on.

Pay Attention.

I had an experience in the not too distant past of seeing a television commercial about family. There were all sorts of images, as I recall, and one of them included two women. Tears came to my eyes, and I was surprised to realize that no matter how much affirmation you feel from within or even from those around you, there’s something special about seeing someone like you out there. This is one of the reasons that I have always loved Sesame Street, which has always made a great effort to show racial and cultural diversity. Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood (the recent animated offshoot of Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood) also has racial and cultural diversity, including a human friend of Daniel Tiger, Miss Elaina, whose dark African-American skin matches her father’s, even though her mother Lady Elaine, is white. It is not an accident that these two shows (along with Dora the Explorer) are my son’s regular shows. In Sesame Street, racial diversity shown but not explicitly discussed (as far as I know). Daniel Tiger has an episode called Same and Different, where the characters discuss just that—skin color is one of the things they point out. Miss Elaina has the same dark skin color as Teacher Harriet.

I would venture to say that a good number of the picture books we own in our house feature animals as main characters. We have probably a vast majority of the books in our collection celebrating different shades of skin. We love Peter from The Snowy Day (thanks to the groundbreaking work of Ezra Jack Keats, who was the first children’s author to create a black character whose race was incidental to the story line in 1963). There are a lot more books these days celebrating African-American kids. But still, “According to an analysis of the Cooperative Children’s Book Center at the University of Wisconsin, of 3,200 children’s books published in 2013, just 93 were about black people.” (Donovan Ramsey “30 Classic books to inspire African-American kids” ,

March 14, 2014 thegrio.com) Our son has a subscription to Ladybug magazine, which has a story each month about Max and Kate, a white boy and an African-American girl who are friends. Each issue is diverse in its portrayal of children and families. High Five (the Highlights magazine for younger kids) also does a similarly good job of multiracial, multicultural representation, including one month, a story that had a family with a white mom, one white brother, and one African-American brother. Walter Dean Myers wrote in a New York Times editorial (March 15, 2014), reminding us: “Books transmit values. They explore our common humanity. What is the message when some children are not represented in those books? Where are the future white personnel managers going to get their ideas of people of color? Where are the future white loan officers and future white politicians going to get their knowledge of people of color? Where are black children going to get a sense of who they are and what they can be?”

I like to preach about the inherent worth and dignity of every person; I don't like to have to admit within that context that appearances matter, that images are important. But they are. What we expose our kids to affects how they understand the world. It takes intention to seek out books and images and media that reflect a particular vision of the world—in my family's case, one that reflects a particular kind of diversity. It's important for us, and it's important for everyone else. The world, I would argue, is becoming more and more multiracial and multicultural. In the congregation which I serve, Unity Temple Unitarian Universalist Congregation, while we have more limited racial and cultural diversity among our adult population, our children and youth, through adoption (both international and domestic), blended families, and interracial marriages are part of a population that is much more diverse. What we show them and talk about should reflect that reality and the vision thereof.

We love everything about the preschool that our son attends except its lack of racial diversity. Last year, he came home with an absolutely stunning school picture—his first genuine smile for a posed photo. But the background in the photo, like his skin, was brown, so it didn't provide the best contrast. This year, my wife had a number of conversations about the photo and background in the hopes that we would not have a similar issue. The photographer did listen, though the photos have not yet come out yet. This is just one example in which it feels simply like no one ever

gave a thought to what something might mean for someone with another skin tone. There are new opportunities for learning almost everywhere.

Tell Your Truth.

Here is some of what I learned about race growing up the way that I did: (at East Hills Elementary, in my family, and at the First Unitarian Church of Pittsburgh)—we are different and the same and all of that is to be celebrated; it's our job to fight racial injustice; and there are many people who make a difference in the world from all races and cultures. Here is what I did not learn: how to talk about personal experiences of race. I am only now just really learning. As I have learned (relatively recently) to say, matter of factly, "Some kids have mommies and daddys, and some kids have mommys and mamas, and some kids have daddys and papas" (and other variations thereof), I am learning to say just as matter of factly: "Your skin is brown and mama's is pink. Your eyes are brown just like Oompa's." And so on. It seems ridiculous that this should not be second nature, but I think I also got a message that in some ways race shouldn't matter and so we shouldn't talk about it. I am appalled to recall that my best friend in high school (and church) was African-American and we literally never talked about race. Needless to say, my son's questions and observations (and being his advocate) have called upon me to urgently change this practice. (I often mention to the parents of my first graders who are about to participate in the Our Whole Lives values based sexuality education that our first graders are totally open to talking about the issues involved; it's the parents who have all the baggage. The same, I believe, is true when it comes to issues of race.)

Ten years ago, in 2004, I went on the Civil Rights tour of the south with Gordon and Judy Gibson. It's safe to say it was transformative for me. I remember this one particular moment in Selma, Alabama, where our local host and guide was Joanne Bland. She had been active in fighting for civil rights there even at a very young age (and was still when we were there.) The group of us stood in a spot that had been a staging area for the march to Montgomery. Now it's really just a vacant lot, but she had us look around and find a small rock to hold in our hands. We each found one, and then she did a most remarkable thing—she walked around, peering into our hands. "Oh," she said, looking at one, "That's the rock that Hosea Williams had. That's a lot of responsibility." With her

words, she made it seem that we were both simultaneously back in 1965 and in the present with a call to keep on making a difference in the world. It was incredibly powerful. She told us to keep those rocks—we should do it where we could see them every day—to remind us to work for justice, to remind us of our history, our responsibility, our legacy. I have it sitting on my dresser.

Part of that responsibility, as we tend to the young people in our care, is to share those stories. Vincent Harding's book Hope and History: Why we must share the story of the movement argues just that. He notes: "Properly located in the context of humankind's best movements for personal and social transformation...the Black-led freedom movement provides great opportunities for creative and healing teaching. From the largest perspective, it demonstrates the ways of human solidarity in the face of oppression, the common hope which empowers people everywhere, the deep yearning for a democratic experience that is far more than periodic voting, but which searches diligently for the best possible ties—rather than the worst tendencies—within us all." (p.5)

I cannot remember a time when I was not acquainted with stories of the civil rights movement, and thus I cannot remember a time when I did not understand that there was a vision for us to aspire and work towards, that ordinary people can and did make a difference in the world. Back then, the stories must have simply been told to me, but now, there are all sorts of children's books that share those different stories for even those at very young ages. There are all sorts of stories—in book form—now: stories about inspirational words (Martin's Big Words, Martin and Mahalia, I have a Dream), stories about leaders (Through My Eyes (Ruby Bridges), March, Book One (John Lewis), We are One (Bayard Rustin)), stories about working for justice (We March, This is the Dream, Let Freedom Sing), and stories about how things felt and were understood by children (Freedom on the Menu, Child of the Civil Rights Movement, Freedom Summer). There are a number of longer books with photographs and pictures for deeper understanding for our young people. One picture book by Andrea Davis Pinkney entitled Sit-in, How Four Friends Stood up by Sitting Down has this gem in it, the "right recipe for integration" : 1. Start with Love. 2. Add conviction. 3. Season with hope. 4. Extra faith to flavor. 5. Mix black people with white people. 6. Let unity

stand. 7. Fold in change. 8. Sprinkle with dignity 9. Bake until golden. 10. Serve immediately. Makes enough for all.” And this from We Shall Overcome: The story of a song by Debbie Levy: “Today, people still struggle against hatred, and for freedom, against poverty, and for fairness, against despair, and for hope. We still sing. We sing to declare that—yes!—we all are human beings, deserving of respect, sharing the same planet, the same future, together.” (p.27) These messages, these stories are worth hearing over and over again. It never gets old to be reminded that one person, a few people working towards justice can make a difference. And that it can be done peacefully and thoughtfully. Now, as ever before, it is far too easy to be discouraged, and so we need to be reminded of hope. Once things that seemed so obviously wrong have been made right and that can and will happen again.

Let Go of the Outcome

Just under twenty-five years ago, I served in the Peace Corps, teaching English as a Foreign language to high school students. I loved much about my experience, but the lack of racial and cultural diversity started to wear down my spirit. In 1992, when the Rodney King/Los Angeles riots broke out, they were covered on Polish television, and one of my fellow teachers said to me, “Boy, all that violence was terrible—but that’s what black people do, isn’t it?” I was horrified, and my Polish language skills completely failed me. Later when I had some perspective, I thought to myself—well, if literally my only perspective on African Americans derived from action packed US American movies, and what I saw on the news… I too might have those ideas. And so I took it upon myself to share some of the stories of the civil rights movement in my classes and talk about race. It was something that I felt like I needed to do. Who knows if anyone heard or remembers or anything? Still, I had to tell my truth. (Which came directly from showing up and paying attention.)

In my seventeenth year of ministry, I am well aware that I am not in charge of what anyone hears when I am up in the pulpit. (Or anywhere for that matter.) But I write my sermons, they are spoken, and then it is out of my hands. And I have learned to trust that people will hear what they need to hear. I would be lying if I didn’t admit there is a very small part of me that wishes for people to pay attention and do exactly what I want them to, but the better part of me knows that lots of people have better ideas for them than I do about what to do or how to make a particular vision

become reality. Ministry is good practice for understanding how essential the letting go is in life, and that it's just as true in that part of ministry that involves bending the arc of the moral universe as it is in others. Gordon Gibson reminds us: "We are charged to be prophetic voices, proclaiming from whatever elevation we can reach the imperatives of love, liberation, community, and justice. But we continually discover that there is no one path to tread, no one set of words to speak, no singular program to follow. We will be wise to derive inspiration from past successes and failures, and from there to respond to the opportunities and challenges before us with flexibility, imagination, and courage."

Our job, as Gibson suggests, as Fannie Lou Hamer suggested in her version of the song, is about proclamation and liberation. However we frame it. There are many mountains to climb or encounter or try to dismantle wherever we look. But if we look more closely, within us and around us, there is also always hope and faith and love.

And so may it always be.

Civil Rights Movement Picture Books (good read alouds)

We March Shane W. Evans

Very simple word and picture book on the August 28, 1963 march on Washington. "We are hot and tired, but we are filled with hope. We lean on each other as we march to justice, to freedom, to our dreams."

I Have a Dream Martin Luther King, Jr.

Some of the speech's text with beautiful illustrations by Kadir Nelson.

We Shall Overcome: The Story of a Song Debbie Levy

Traces the story of this song from slavery to current day as inspiration for freedom fighters.

Let Freedom Sing Vanessa Newton

A tour through major civil rights events using “This little light of mine” lyrics and how those lights changed things. (Includes Barack Obama’ s election.)

Martin and Mahalia; His Words, Her Song **Andrea Davis Pinkney and Brian Pinkney**

The friendship and mutual inspiration of Martin Luther King, Jr and Mahalia Jackson.

Sit-In: How Four Friends Stood Up By Sitting Down **Andrea Davis Pinkney**

The story of the Woolworth sit-ins in Greensboro, NC and its effects, with great language and inspiration.

Martin’s Big Words **Doreen Rappaport**

Life story of MLK, Jr. emphasizing the power of words to change things. Ends with: “His big words are alive for us today.”

Child of the Civil Rights Movement **Paula Young Shelton and Raul Colon**

Andrew Young’ s daughter gives her own perspective on her experiences of the freedom movement.

This is the Dream **Diane Shore and Jessica Alexander**

Book in verse describing Jim Crow conditions, the leaders and people that changed it, and how things are now.

Freedom on the Menu: The Greensboro Sit-ins **Carole Boston Weatherford**

An account of the sit-ins from the perspective of African American 8 year old **Connie.**

Freedom Summer **Deborah Wiles**

A story of two friends, one white and one Black, in the South in 1964.

For Older Readers (but still with lots of pictures)

Through My Eyes Ruby Bridges

First hand account of Ruby Bridges' experiences, integrating (by herself) a school in New Orleans in 1960; includes photos, news accounts and historical context.

We are One: the Story of Bayard Rustin Larry Dane Brimmer

Biography of a sometimes overlooked activist, who helped make the 1963 March on Washington a reality.

Rosa Nikki Giovanni

An account of Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

Freedom's Children Ellen Levine

No pictures, but first hand accounts by children actually involved in the freedom movement.

We've Got A Job: 1963 Birmingham Children's March Cynthia Levinson

Stories of young people who were there help tell the stories from various perspectives.

March, Book One John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, Nate Powell

A graphic novel of John Lewis' civil rights activism, first in a trilogy (not all published.)

A Dream of Freedom: Civil Rights Movement from 1954-1968 Diane McWhorter

Year by year chronology with photographs with an epilogue of the "unfinished work" .

Heart and Soul: The Story of Africa and African Americans Kadir Nelson

Introductory history from slavery through the Civil Rights movement with ideals of democracy, freedom and independence.

If a Bus Could Talk: The Story of Rosa Parks Faith Ringgold

A young child gets on the bus and hears the story of that special seat.

We Shall Not Be Moved Velma Maia Thomas

Covers the Passage from the Great Migration to the Million Man March with photographs and replica of original documents.

Civil Rights Movement for Kids: A history with 21 activities **Mary Turck**
Uses plays, crafts, songs to help make these stories come alive in different ways.