

FROM SELMA TO MONTGOMERY AND SAN JOSE TO SAN FRANCISCO

The article below started out as a letter to my grandson, but it got out of control and became something else. I hope it's meaningful to you.

In solidarity,

Fred Hirsch

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I saw the movie "Selma" last week. It was deeply moving. People who were organizing and taking action to win the right to vote came to life on the screen. They looked a violent, racist, and terrorist system square in the face, and stood firm against it. In doing so, they withstood powerful blows and at the same time, took giant steps on the long road toward winning equality in the right to vote.

The movie has had an immediate impact. Seen in theaters nationwide, it could not help but awaken the political awareness and consciousness of thousands of moviegoers. Surely many of the film's audience were inspired to be among the 70-80,000 civil rights activists who marched across the Edmund Pettus Bridge on March 9, 2015 to commemorate the violent attack under color of law that occurred a half century ago. Thus, it came full circle. The marchers of 1965 inspired the art of the film "Selma" which, in turn, helped to inspire those who demonstrate in 2015. The film artists share the laurels of the people who were beaten on the bridge fifty years ago and of those many thousands who commemorate their heroism by marching today.

Some historical facts might have been altered to fit the film, but film is never literal history. A film gives us history filtered through the collective creative minds and bodies of the artists and skilled film workers who produce it. In the case of "Selma," they give us a work that combines genuine human warmth, with social and political truth. It is a film with current and lasting relevance and reverence for the driving force of the determined men, women and children who took hold of the handle of history in a dangerous and a turbulent time.

Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. told us, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." The courage and strength of the Selma to Montgomery marchers in 1965, the impact of the film, and the spirited determination of the people demonstrating today help to shorten that arc and to bend it more surely toward justice.

The film has its own reality, created by a diverse, mostly African-American group of artists. Today, a half century after the clashes in Selma, so diverse a collection of artists and workers on any film is still, in itself, a significant social, political and cultural statement and achievement.

At that moment of the struggle for voting rights in 1965 the Selma to Montgomery marchers were the leading edge of the Civil Rights Movement, not only in the South, their spirit gripped us nationwide. Our U.S. history of ethnic cleansing of the indigenous people of this land, of slavery, of Jim Crow and of the persistent patterns of white privilege and white supremacy came under sharp challenge. The focus was on the South, but change – and active organizing to move forward toward real democracy and equality surged in communities across the land.

Watching the film, through a few tears and the fog of fifty years gone by, I kept wishing I'd been there. I puzzled briefly about why I had not gone to Selma. I had gone to Mississippi where I met two men who were among the leaders portrayed on the screen, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) leaders, John Lewis and James Forman.

I met John Lewis when I drove a donated car filled with organizational supplies to the SNCC office in Greenwood, Mississippi in 1963. During that visit a small group of us were jailed for "blocking the sidewalk" while registering voters. Soon after my return our local San Jose Friends of SNCC brought Lewis here to speak at a fund raising event in Milpitas at the Auto Workers, Local 560 union hall. Lewis stayed with our family that night. He was great explaining the struggle to our seven and eight year old girls.

Don Edwards, Our Congressman, introduced Lewis at the UAW hall. Edwards, too, had been in Mississippi to visit his son Len in Ruleville. His car was firebombed as racist retribution for Len's work registering Black voters during Mississippi Summer – and as a warning to our Congressman.

Jim Forman and I met when I brought another donated car with a load of 8x11 paper and a mimeograph machine to SNCC in Holly Springs.

Midway in the film my memory kicked in. I didn't go to Selma in 1965 because we were too busy here in San Jose. We had built a substantial Friends of SNCC organization locally. The same day that the final march from Selma to Montgomery got under way, we had a rally on the steps of our courthouse on Market Street, mirroring the voting rights demands in Selma and protesting the violence unleashed on Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Our rally drew several hundred people. Among the speakers were Andy Montgomery, dynamic leader of our local Congress of Racial Equality, a leader from the NAACP (It may have been Wester Sweet.) and C.W. Washington, Pastor of Antioch Baptist Church. I, too, spoke as Co-Chair of Friends of SNCC. A SNCC activist from the audience called for us all to march to the Federal Building in San Francisco, "right now" to demand action from Cecil Poole, then U.S. Attorney for the District of Northern California. I thought the suggestion was absurd. How could we do such a thing without preparation?

After a few minutes of animated discussion we voted to do it. The most logical route was agreed upon – to follow El Camino Real all the way. We urged people to go home and bring what they needed for a few days on the road, sleeping bags, rain gear, whatever needed for camping out. About fifty of us started the trek carrying the signs we had for the rally, demanding voting rights and an end to racist violence. Our sound equipment, secured to the roof of my car, was a pair of rectangular speakers, powered by the car battery. In its first life the system was mounted on a Landing Craft Infantry (LCI) barge that carried troops from ships to beaches to battle in World War II. In its second life the speaker system served Retail Clerks Local 428 (now UFCW 5) for union organizing rallies in the parking lots of their targeted stores.

The spontaneous decision to march to San Francisco put some strains on us. Andy Montgomery and I had been responsible for organizing the Voting Rights rally in San Jose. We became the de facto leaders at the start of the March. We happily shared that responsibility with people from the NAACP, the Council of Churches, the Labor Council, the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom and others. While some people started marching, others scrambled to public telephones to call their organizations for help.

I called Lou Bosco, top officer of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union, seeking places where the marchers could eat for free. Bosco was thoroughly pissed at such an off the wall request. When he finished cursing at me he said he'd do what he could and named several possible places along our route.

The first was a buffet restaurant in Santa Clara. We had to move fast to get there in time. The management, having received a "demand" from the union, was all upset, not knowing who was going to pay. We didn't know either. They fed about fifty of us. I think the union paid a very reduced price.

We deviated from our route to march, through a part of the Santa Clara University campus. Many students welcomed us. Some threw stuff at us from dorm windows. Some joined the march.

John Beecher, who was teaching at the university joined us. Beecher was a descendent of Harriet Beecher Stowe of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' fame. John Beecher was a poet, journalist, and teacher. He gave us a passionate speech that brought some students to join the march. Beecher had many media contacts. He helped greatly to publicize our San Jose to San Francisco version of the Selma to Montgomery civil rights march.

Dave Fowler was another person who publicized the march. Fowler, in his early twenties said he was a "stringer" for NBC or CBS radio news and some other outlets. He was tickled to join us and puff up the importance of what we were doing. Fowler was paid by the piece so the more important he made us, the more money he was able to make following the progress of what turned out to be a four day march.

The happy circumstance of picking up both John Beecher and Dave Fowler made us a continuing story in the public eye. Some people came to join our trek. Various churches opened their facilities to feed us and their floors for us to sleep. One group of women from a church in Oakland repeatedly brought us meals and set up tables along the road. Others brought snacks and sodas, tamales and sandwiches. Some people walked with us for a few miles. Some for a day. Some stayed with us all the way. The generosity of our supporters caused some who did the whole stretch to complain of having gained weight on the march.

A group from Marin County followed our example and marched across the Golden Gate Bridge to join us at the Federal Building in San Francisco. People from Oakland came marching across the Bay Bridge. Civil Rights activists in San Francisco set up the rally as a crowd gathered and the marches converged at the Federal Building. Our ranks had multiplied to many thousands to make our demands to U.S. Attorney Cecil Poole, the direct representative of the U.S. Attorney General in the San Francisco Bay Area. We demanded that the federal government act to end the violence against civil rights workers in the South by sending in federal marshals to guarantee their constitutional rights and to guarantee African Americans their equal right to the ballot box.

When we arrived at our destination, the Federal Building in San Francisco, the same man who, back at the courthouse steps in San Jose, had called for doing the march, spoke out again. There was a rectangular, decorative pool, near the entrance to the Federal Building. That man who

got us started took off his worn shoes, rolled up his pants, and danced in the water. He invited others to "Come on in and comfort your feet right here in Cecil's Pool."

It took three attempts in Selma to finally put that 1965 march on the road to Montgomery. Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, Jim Forman, other leaders and thousands of very exceptional ordinary working class people in Alabama faced down the brutal, racist terrorists of the Jim Crow System. Demonstrators like ourselves in the San Francisco Bay Area and others who who put their feet in the streets in cities around the country, people who took action and took their cues from those on the front line in Alabama helped to shorten "The arc of the moral universe" and bend it " towards justice."

Many of us and our progeny are still fighting for equal rights and an end to every aspect of the racism and white privilege that persists in so many areas of life here in what we ritually describe as "the land of the free and the home of the brave."

Every delegate meeting of our local AFL-CIO Labor Council opens with the "Pledge of Allegiance," which describes our republic "with liberty and justice for all." Those words are usually followed by the voices of a few delegates saying "some day." It won't even be "some day" unless we keep faith with words that rang out along the road from Selma to Montgomery and along the road from San Jose to San Francisco: "I'm gonna keep on walkin,' keep on talkin,' marchin' to freedom land...Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round!"

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