

Good Trouble on the Journey to Justice



True Stories Compiled by



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Good Trouble on the Journey to Justice

Preface

The Community Arts Grant awarded to the League of Women Voters Saratoga County (LWVSC) and sponsored by Saratoga Springs United Methodist Church is “Good Trouble on the Journey to Justice.” The theme, inspired at the time of John Lewis and Ruth Bader Ginsburg’s passing, created an opportunity to share stories of personal or family members’ challenges to achieve justice. The artist, Francalise Dawkins, created a fabric collage with photos of the story contributors along with quotes from the narratives.

Good Trouble is evident in the stories of those seeking to effect change. Courage is reflected in taking a stand against wrong and giving support for unpopular actions to obtain justice. As you read the stories and view the collage, please consider your personal reaction to their words. Hopefully, you will share your thoughts through written comments.

The timeline for the project spans from summer 2020 until the current time. This is a period of the covid isolation which brought challenges and rewards. The positive was establishing connections with others during a very lonely time and creating a compelling project. The impossibility of gathering in person made it difficult to encourage sharing of deeply personal stories. The project includes fewer stories than anticipated but the courage and variety of challenges are amazing.

Inspiration

Ruth Bader Ginsburg (RGB), who served as supreme court justice for 27 years, died on September 18, 2021. This was well into the COVID pandemic and added to the somber climate for the LWVSC team writing the Community Arts Grant. RGB had provided a strong voice for gender equality (both male and female), workers’ rights and separation of church and state. Her desire for well researched and courageous decisions was an inspiration for many seeking justice. Not only is she known for her success but also for the strength of her dissents, which she often read aloud in court. Reflecting on her contributions provided direction for the grant team.

John Robert Lewis (JRL) who served in the US House of Representatives from 1983 until his death on July 17, 1987. His life's work was dedicated to pursuing justice without the use of violence. The contribution of his efforts combined with his fearless disregard for his personal safety humbled many who witnessed his "rides" and "marches" for freedom. The loss of JRL combined with the death of RGB served as an inspirational catalyst for the grant team. Early in his esteemed career he identified the need for "good trouble". The words of John Robert Lewis are contained in the title of the Community Arts Grant, "Good Trouble on the Journey to Justice."

Acknowledgements

Members of the League of Women Voters Saratoga County are grateful for this opportunity from Saratoga Arts made possible with a Community Arts Grant funded by the New York Council on the Arts with the support of the New York State Governor and New York State legislature. The Saratoga Springs United Methodist Church graciously gave the required sponsorship. Charlie Owen's guidance was instrumental in achieving funding for the grant. Pattie Garrett took many of the photos included in the collage. Francelise Dawkins created the fabric collage and worked patiently with the members of the grant writing team, Pattie Garrett, Ann Kril, Barbara Thomas, and Linda Gush, to make the project a reality.

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Good Trouble on the Journey to Justice

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Just Doing My Job by Betty Gallagher

It started as an inquisitive and rather innocent journey. Raised by Canadian parents and receiving my education at a Canadian university, I needed to better understand the US political system. What better way than to work with a few friends to start a chapter of LWV in Saratoga. Fast forward to 1973 and my appointment by Attorney General Lefkowitz as a special investigator assigned to election fraud. On primary day the Albany Democratic machine “enforcer” Jimmy Ryan shoved the poll watchers, Carol Wallace, Sister Honora, and me from Pumper 11 polling place, representing the single largest election district in the City of Albany as he shouted obscenities at us saying, “you shit” grabbed my election booklet and threw it over his shoulder. He said, “I don’t give a shit about this booklet, and you have no right to be here if I do not want you here.” All of this began when I observed that the distance marker was 55 feet from the door, not 100 feet as required by election law. My companions and I tried to use a public phone to call the election office, but a mailman stepped in front of us and stated that he had some long calls to make. We were finally able to call the police, as directed by the board of elections, from a school nurse’s office. Officers arrived and assisted with placement of some of the markers. When we asked the police to consult with James Ryan about our status under election law, the officer replied that he was under Mr. Ryan. Mr. Ryan stated that it was his polling place and he could throw out anyone he did not want there. Also, upon our return to Pumper 11 two poll watchers stated that on a number of occasions voters had gone two even three at a time into the voting booth. Jimmy was observed going into the booth with voters and giving them names of candidates. Jimmy’s brother Charles and their father were passing cards with candidates’ names to voters.

After the polls closed, Jimmy reached into the ballot box and started looking at the ballots. My companions and I told him that they needed to be counted first. Many violations of ballot counting took place such as placing them face up, sorting them into stacks prior to tallying and quickly calling out Republican numbers to prevent accurate recording. When my fellow inspectors and I reinforced the Republicans right to complain, both Ryans rushed toward us and pushed us roughly out the door. I felt afterward as if I had been hit hard by a fist or the palm of a hand from behind, since I had localized pain between my shoulder blades and in my chest. I told them I felt as if I had been assaulted and then the doors of the fire station came crashing down behind

me. A number of newspaper articles, editorials, and even a cartoon were created to describe these events. Mr. Ryan confirmed the incident, telling reporters, "I probably did call them some names. I'd have broken their arms and thrown them out in the street if I had to when they started taking those markers down."

Warrants were issued for James Ryan on three felony charges of election law violation and three counts of harassment which resulted in a Supreme Court appearance. The Order of \$1,000 bail stunned most people in attendance at the initial hearing. He ultimately pleaded guilty to a reduced charge of harassment and paid a \$100 fine. Later, charges were filed against me in Police Court. At the time, my family and I were enjoying a camping vacation in Nova Scotia. My 13-year-old son heard the news of my arrest as he listened to his favorite programs on the car radio. Upon entering the tent, he asked me, "is your name Elizabeth?" I replied "Yes, but most people call me Betty?" He said, "It's on the news that there is a warrant for your arrest, but it can't be served because you left the country." The Albany Grand Jury did not find me guilty and the \$200 legal fees were paid by the Attorney General after I requested reimbursement honoring indemnification. Perhaps the appropriate level of justice was not achieved but my good trouble initiated close scrutiny of election fraud in Albany and brought about the downfall of the O'Connell Democratic Machine enforced by the corrupt Ryan family.

Statements included in collage:

"He said, 'you have no right to be here if I do not want you here.'" Betty Gallagher

"Perhaps the appropriate level of justice was not achieved but my good trouble initiated close scrutiny of election fraud." Betty Gallagher

"I felt afterwards as if I had been hit hard by a fist or the palm of a hand from behind, since I had localized pain between my shoulder blades and in my chest. I told them I felt as if I had been assaulted and then the doors of the fire station came crashing down behind me." Betty Gallagher



Saratogians for Equality and Acceptance of Diversity

by Jean Fei

Saratoga Springs – lovely quiet upstate NY always rocked in the summertime. In the 1970's the seasonal August Race crowd found license plates from every State cruising past the Flat Track and hucksters sang out from every corner such as "Shoe Shines for a Buck". On Broadway, entrepreneurs, pickpockets, and gamblers of the world thronged the streets. Violence under the raucous laughter threatened and broke out at a bar when three white men started to harass and beat Hispanic College students – who were arrested and thrown in jail as the three white men slipped out the back. It was the same hot summer that the Ku Klux Klan held a parade in Schuylerville to support enraged citizens who turned on a Jewish family for protesting the mural of Jesus decorating the auditorium wall of the federally funded local high school. And then, the cross-burning in Wilton, or was it the rock through the bedroom window in Ballston Spa? Well- mannered citizens of Saratoga did not like this growing trend and by fall, organized a community wide meeting of civic leaders, religious elders, and noble service providers to decide what to do about it. And so SEAD, Saratogians for Equality and Diversity was born. For about 10 years we made GOOD trouble, and it was fun. It wasn't always easy and the way was not clear, but we tried a lot of things and we learned a lot and reached thousands of people over time. It was really a bunch of people, misfits maybe to some, each who had common concerns about different targeted groups. Pulled together by a desire to resist the pain and to celebrate the awesome fullness of individuals. And yes, I got hate mail at my home because I dared to say the word, "Peace."

By the early 2000's we were hosting an Annual Diversity Day on the first weekend of June. I ran the Respecting Difference Writing Contest for 8th and 9th grade students. judged by a newspaper editor and college faculty we recognized the 10 most Outstanding works with a luncheon and \$50 Savings Bond. That first year just happened to be the year of Columbine, the first high school shooting massacre. About 400 students submitted something and most wrote about their feelings about being different, seeing difference, inclusion and exclusion, things they did not have space to express elsewhere. We had everything from a Bean Cooking Contest (black bean brownies won!), to beautiful cultural ethnic arts and craft shows. We held a Perennial

Exchange Day at the Visitors Center to share the beauty of our favorite flowers with the whole City. Live bands, belly dancers, youth troupes and magicians glowed the full vibrant color of a healthy community. Eventually we even got some grant money and started a project at the subsidized housing projects, named (by them) Terrace Kids in Action! Weekly meetings, cooking, sewing, dancing, painting, creating stories, songs, and poetry. Apples and Ground Rules. Men and women of different cultures and backgrounds teaching them. Putting little seedlings into fertile soil. Many years later a mom stopped me at the grocery store and showed me a picture of a beautiful young woman. “That’s my daughter,” she said. “She just got a (college) degree. You need to know because you came and got her when nobody else cared.” Through the resistance and despite the hard times, mostly I got to work with wonderful people who are filled with hope and love, who believe that we do make a difference with the words we use and the ideas we express. And some of those flowers still bloom in my garden every year. That is good trouble to me!

Statements included in collage:

“It wasn’t always easy and the way was not clear, but we tried a lot of things and we learned a lot and reached thousands of people over time.” Jean Fei

“We were pulled together by a desire to resist the pain and to celebrate the awesome fullness of individuals.” Jean Fei

“And yes, I got hate mail at my home because I dared to say the word, ‘Peace.’” Jean Fei

“Men and women of different cultures and backgrounds teaching them. Putting little seedlings into fertile soil. “ Jean Fei

“That’s my daughter,” she said. “She just got a (college) degree. You need to know because you came and got her when nobody else cared.” Jean Fei

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Jean Fei



One Step on the Journey to Reproductive Justice

by Barbara Thomas

I was in Saratoga Hospital to have a hysterectomy – a medically necessary operation to remove large fibroid tumors that were causing excessive bleeding and pain. I had scheduled my sick time from work (at Planned Parenthood) and my Mother-in-Law had arrived to take care of my four children.

It was late afternoon of the day before the scheduled procedure and I was in the hospital bed, wearing my patient gown, when the nurse came in and said she had the permission slip for my husband to sign when he came in to visit me later that day. Up until that point it hadn't occurred to me that, because a consequence of the operation would be my sterility, the hospital would require my husband's permission for me to undergo the hysterectomy.

I knew from my work with women who wanted tubal ligations, frequently women with many children and abusive husbands, that hospitals required their husband's permission for that sterilization procedure. It often required proving that the husband had abandoned the family, or that there was an order of protection against him, for the woman to access the care she wanted.

I felt that every woman should have the right to control what happens to her own body, so I called my husband at work and told him not to sign the permission form when he came in. Then I called the Albany office of the New York Civil Liberties Union and explained the situation to them. They arranged for me to speak with one of their attorneys.

Their attorney then called the legal department at the hospital, and after some back and forth over a period of hours, and, with the threat of being sued if I was denied the procedure, the hospital agreed to change their policy regarding all reproductive procedures. And Glens Falls Hospital changed their similar policies, too. Luckily, my gynecologist understood my position and supported the delay while the problem was resolved. By 10pm, the procedure was put back on the operating room schedule.

This was just one small bit of trouble and anxiety on the journey to reproductive justice – which still hasn't been won.

Statements included in collage:

“I felt that every woman should have the right to control what happens to her own body.” Barbara Thomas

This was just one small bit of trouble and anxiety on the journey to reproductive justice – which still hasn't been won.” Barbara Thomas

“These were the days of literacy tests, where the difficulty of the questions varied with the color of one's skin.” Barbara Thomas



Laying Her Body on the Line - Risking Trouble to Stand Up for What's Right by Barbara Thomas

My mother, Anne Koeppicus, packed a bag with summer clothes and got on the bus to spend two weeks teaching in a Freedom School in Hattiesburg, Mississippi. It was 1964, her kids were grown and out of the house, her husband Bob saw her off. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) had organized the group coming from NYC and also the Freedom Schools, which would attempt to give the residents of Mississippi the tools they needed to be able to organize and register to vote. These were the days of literacy tests, where the difficulty of the questions varied with the color of one's skin.

The "teachers" were housed in the homes of members of the black community. Anne's host family were poor but very protective of her. The husband drove her to the Freedom School in his old car – and he had a gun to protect both her and himself if he were questioned about having a white woman in his car (this was a violation of the segregation laws of the time). My mother was on edge and scared the entire time she was in Mississippi, but she went ahead, pretending that she wasn't. Everything from the cockroaches scrambling over her toothbrush every night, to the proliferation of guns that everyone – white and black - had in their possession was cause for alarm. She would see cars full of white men with shotguns riding through the section of town where she stayed, and going back and forth near the Freedom school.

Anne taught woefully uneducated adults how to write enough to fill out registration forms, and taught others how to type enough to begin to acquire a skill that might help them get a job. She was proud of her involvement in Freedom Summer, but very glad to get back home to her block where she felt absolutely safe in her mainly black neighborhood.

Anne didn't just go to a lot of trouble to protest discrimination. She was opposed to war, especially nuclear war, and went to many marches to protest the use of atomic weapons, but also the Vietnam War. She had her own little folding seat that she took with her to be able to sit down and rest her back at peace and anti-war rallies and marches. And she spoke truth to power. As an officer in the secretaries' unit of the

United Federation of Teachers, she tried, in vain, to get Al Shanker to take a stand against the Vietnam War.

Statements included in the collage:

“These were the days of literacy tests, where the difficulty of the questions varied with the color of one’s skin.” Barbara Thomas

“The husband drove her to the Freedom School in his old car – and he had a gun to protect both her and himself if he were questioned about having a white woman in his car (this was a violation of the segregation laws of the time).” Barbara Thomas



Fighting for Marriage Equality

by Lori Dawson

My struggle for marriage equality began in early 2009 while guiding my Quaker Meeting through the process of reaching agreement on whether we would hold same-sex marriages under the care of our Meeting. While researching information, I found that two state Leagues had done studies and reached agreement on having marriage equality positions. In February 2010, I began to work on bringing the Maine and Maryland marriage equality positions to the LWV National Convention in Atlanta, GA. As I assembled the materials necessary to propose the concurrence, I also reached out to League members across the county. I was supported by LWVUS staff who provided me with process and timeline information and offered many encouraging emails. Soon League members across the country began contacting me via email to wish me well and offer support. As the June LWVUS Convention approached, I assembled booklets with the concurrence materials to bring to Convention, emailed the materials to all registered Delegates and prepared the caucus presentation. I was working hard to have everything ready in time.

I told the standing room only caucus crowd that my goal was to provide information to allow Delegates to make an informed vote, but not attempt to convince anyone of how to vote. I felt the entire room exhale with relief. I introduced representatives from Maine and Maryland who did an overview of their Marriage Equality Studies, and we presented the Marriage Equality Positions of MD & ME. I explained why I felt it was critical that we have Marriage Equality: because a system where people can be married in one state and not in another which is where we were headed is fraught with problems. The League needed to be prepared to support federal legislation when it emerged.

When I opened it up to questions, one woman in the room was clearly not in favor of marriage equality. She had a tension and urgency about her that required that I remain calm and centered. I did my best to answer questions she raised, but for the most part I simply acknowledged that I heard her objections. In the end, she provided us with every objection that we needed to be prepared to answer during the debate. I then let everyone know that we would now move to the strategizing hour. Thanking everyone for coming I asked those who wished to help get the concurrence passed to come

down front. About 20 people stayed to go over the timeline & process and plan who would say what during the debate.

On the day of the debate, our supporters were ready with their slips of paper that they would read announcing their reasons for supporting marriage equality. Only one person stood at a Con microphone while lines of people stood at both Pro mics. After a few minutes of no other Con Delegates, we called the question, closing debate and moving to a vote. When the president asked for those in favor, the room rang out with AYE! And only one voice said Nay In opposition. The president exclaimed, “One step forward for equality” and the room broke out in applause and cheers.

Amazingly, in June 2011 Gov. Andrew Cuomo introduced a bill that would bring marriage equality to New York. Because we had the Marriage Equality position, we were able to lobby Senator Roy McDonald as members of the LWV. In the end, Sen. McDonald was one of four Republican Senators who voted in favor reaching the necessary votes to make NY the sixth state to support gay marriage. Sadly, Senator McDonald lost the primary for his seat due to constituents who disagreed with his change of heart. I always felt that it was important to secure marriage equality for all prior to getting married. With marriage equality secured for everyone, Michael and I finally married after 20 years together.

Statements included in collage:

“The president exclaimed, ‘One step forward for equality’ and the room broke out in applause and cheers.” Lori Dawson

“I told the standing room only caucus crowd that my goal was to provide information to allow delegates to make an informed vote, but not attempt to convince anyone of how to vote. I felt the entire room exhale with relief.” Lori Dawson

“She had a tension and urgency about her that required that I remain calm and centered.” Lori Dawson



Supporting Friends in Good Trouble by Pastor Heather

I feel that as a community we need to support each other and to find ways to keep justice moving for the hope of our community. Through stories and active listening, we can begin to truly understand each other and find ways to work together for the common good on our journey toward justice.

I can relay one story of bearing witness to racism and how hate does not work for the common good. I have found Saratoga Springs to be very inviting and welcoming. In 2019, I attended a school board meeting to support one of our congregation who was a member of the school board. At this meeting there was a disagreement over guards in the school having guns. I attended this meeting not to speak but to show support by my presence. I wanted my friend to look out and see me there for her.

Another friend was also in the audience and asked me if I had signed up to speak. I replied no and he requested that I stand with him at the microphone. I did but when he finished he asked me if I would like the rest of his time. The tension in that room was overwhelming and so intense I felt like weeping. I told the people present that the name-calling and swearing were mind-blowing and must stop. This behavior was not the Saratoga I was welcomed into and that the school board members also have children attending the same schools as their children.

Later I was asked if I felt any racial tension at this meeting. My answer was yes. I had asked someone else to come for support of the school board and because he was black I feared for his safety coming through the wall of angry men that covered the doorway. Well justified given the comments of the men then and upon my departure. As a pastor, I have found myself in fearful situations and this one was at the top of my list. I felt safer walking to my car in the most impoverished communities of Syracuse, where gunfire was actually ringing in the night air, than I did walking to my car in the school parking lot in Saratoga Springs.

On another occasion, I attended a public forum for clergy regarding police reform. The invitation came two days prior to the event during the busiest time of the year as

a pastor, Advent. A letter arrived in the mail inviting clergy to a meeting the next day to discuss police reform. At the meeting, I expressed the need for all of us to keep talking to keep showing up for one another and to set up systems that keep power in check for the good of all Saratoga's citizens.

Statements included in collage:

“The tension in that room was overwhelming and so intense I felt like weeping. I told the people present that the name calling and swearing was mind blowing and must stop.” Pastor Heather

“This behavior was not the Saratoga I knew.” Pastor Heather

“I was so anxious for him, as a black man, that I felt compelled to meet him at the door, walk in with him and sit together. I do not know what I thought I was going to do but I had asked him to come to a place where I knew he would not be safe.” Pastor Heather

“I have seen instances where people do not feel safe, instances of social injustice and moments of fear but never here in Saratoga. As a person of faith, we have to keep talking, keep speaking and showing up for one another.” Pastor Heather



Courage to Start Anew by Dora Lee Stanley

My parents were born in rural Georgia in 1920. During that time, they were experiencing financial exploitation, political disenfranchisement, not allowed to vote, and employment opportunities limited to share cropping.

This social tension was mainly through the Jim Crow laws of the era. You had sub-standard schooling. You had to go into the store through the back door. If you think the store clerk added up your amount incorrectly, you could be killed for questioning a white person. When white people were walking on the sidewalk, you had to step off to let them pass.

My parents thought things would be better up north and became part of the migration of 6 million Black Americans who left the rural south between 1916 and 1970 to escape the brutality of Jim Crow laws. My mother went first to Atlantic City and my father to New York City while a maternal uncle went to Detroit. People migrated north and west.

My cousin who was a soldier in WWII. He fought in Europe and faced segregation abroad and in the USA while treated like a second-class citizen. All military branches had separate blood banks, medical staff, hospitals, barracks and recreational facilities for Black soldiers. He was forced to live in segregated housing and treated as a half citizen when he returned home in the South.

Black soldiers were confronted by Whites because they did not like to see a Black man in uniform. This is a Social Justice story. If my parents did not have the courage to migrate, leave their families, and take a chance on living in the North, I would not be here with a Bachelors and Master's Degree. My children would not have had the opportunity to pursue professional careers as a medical doctor, federal law enforcement, airline technology and management.

Statement included in collage:

“This social tension was mainly through the Jim Crow laws of the era. You had substandard schooling. You had to go into the store through the back door. If you think the store clerk added up your amount incorrectly, you could be killed for questioning a white person.” Dora Lee Stanley



Demand Respect by Francelise Dawkins

There was a time when I was living in Glens Falls that the big supermarkets placed pictures on the floor to catch shoppers' attention. The pictures were of people and because they were on the floor, shoppers walked over them. I became really incensed when I saw a picture of an African-American woman on the floor and I was supposed to wheel my cart over her face. My friends went with me to speak to the store management. I said, "We think this is an outrage. How would you like it if your grandmother's face was on the floor and people wheeled their grocery carts over her image?" They finally removed the pictures.

Statement included in collage:

"I became really incensed when I saw a picture of an African-American woman on the floor and I was supposed to wheel my cart over it." Francelise Dawkins



Moving Forward by Beth Shropshire

I have a feeling that my story doesn't fit. It was at a podium like this. That is where my story goes. I moved up here with one guy and left him because of abuse and married another local guy. I worked in a restaurant and that is where I met him.

He was the delight of the town. People were so excited for me. He was good in short relationships but he was not that way in long-term relationships. We had a baby very soon. In abusive situations you are always made to feel that you are inferior. He became increasingly emotionally abusive and I was just quiet. But when he went after our son, I became momma bear and yelled at him to stop. That is when I was physically abused. I was lucky because laws had been passed so every county has to have a shelter for abused people and that is where I went.

I took advantage of the services provided by the Domestic Violence Project which is sponsored by the Catholic Charities. They had a project called Clothesline where victims of survivors of domestic abuse could make a t-shirt. Some people made them for those who did not survive. As many people know the most common way a woman dies is at the hand of a partner. I was asked to speak for the Clothesline project and I agreed.

My former husband was a student at ACC and I was also studying there. I had two stories to tell. I was not even going to tell our story. I wasn't brave enough and I felt I didn't need to shame him. But I was approached by the Dean of the college and asked not to participate in the event. My former husband had informed him; I am not sure how he found out. At that point I told the Dean I would speak.

My husband carries a gun and he should have lost that privilege the first time I left him. Now that I was leaving and taking his children, I was in danger. There are red flags now, thanks to laws to protect victims.

I called the director of domestic violence and she supported as well as encouraged me. When I went in to speak, a group of women surrounded me ready to take a bullet

for me, They did the same thing when I went to court. When I spoke I told our story and it was very empowering but also very frightening.

Even today on that rare occasion that I run into him, there is still that trauma. I plan to retire after spending 26 years working with emotionally disturbed children. When I come across their stories, I can identify good things that come out of it. I understand from a very deep place what people go through so this is a positive. I am comforted by the quote about courage being moving forward even though you're afraid. It is not about being fearless.

Statements included in collage:

“...women surrounded me ready to take a bullet for me. They did the same thing when I went to court. When I spoke I told our story and it was very empowering but also very frightening.” Beth Shropshire

“In abusive situations you are always made to feel that you are inferior.” Beth Shropshire

“I am comforted by the quote about courage being moving forward even though you're afraid. It is not about being fearless.” Beth Shropshire



Hazing is Not Funny

by Linda Rosa Gush

My ninth-grade son and I were looking through sale items when he asked, “Could you buy me one of these jackets so I can put my varsity letter on it?” My reply was, “Won’t you receive one when you join the varsity club?” He angrily stated “I am not joining. You have to do stuff to be a member.” This was disappointing to me because I assumed he did not want to perform a service to the community. I refrained from saying anything further and we quietly moved on to other clothing and conversational items.

As Assistant Superintendent for Instruction in the school district, athletics was not my direct responsibility. I had forgotten about the jacket conversation when I heard one of the secretaries laughing about “Fun Night”. I had only attended the first part of this well intended high school event which was an opportunity to give elementary children a Halloween Celebration without the risks of Trick or Treating. High School students created games, organized a parade, held contests and distributed candy. Everyone considered this a very festive evening.

The secretary was describing the initiation of varsity club members in the traditional strip show which was the final act of the evening after the elementary children left. Male athletes would dress as female strippers complete with makeup and water balloons for breasts. They would be on the stage dancing to music and finish by pulling the balloons out and bursting them. This earned them a jacket. The others in the office laughed with the secretary. Recalling the conversation with my son it became clear what “doing stuff” truly meant. I felt ill and said to the people gathered around chuckling, “This offends me on so many levels, I don’t even know where to begin.” I was told, “Oh, you’ll love seeing your son up there. It’s hilarious.”

At this point I told the Superintendent I needed to leave for a little while. Luckily when I arrived home my husband was there and I told him what had happened and asked him if I was crazy to be so offended. He reinforced my feelings. When I returned to school, I met with the Superintendent and told him about the sequence of events and said it must stop. He called in the High School Principal who responded that it was the favorite part of the evening and everyone looked forward to it.

I am not proud of my response but I did say, ‘You have a high school daughter. Tell her to get up onstage and pull a banana out of her pants. That sick feeling you have now is the one I have.’ He was angry and said he had a recording of the performance from last year. When it was played, I could not believe the looks on the young men’s faces as they danced to hoots from the audience. Their expressions were similar to the absent stares of abuse and shame. It was not until the female guidance counselor said she always tried to leave before the performance because she couldn’t stand to watch it that the administration group ceased telling me I was being outrageous.

To his credit, the Superintendent ended this tradition. However, the students, other administrators, and the school board thought I was ridiculous. My son had to withstand taunts from fellow students. It was the beginning of my sensitivity to hazing and initiation rites. This became the focus of much of my reading and resulted in a combined school/college effort when I became a District Superintendent. But on that day, I told my son, “I know what ‘Doing Stuff’ means and I am proud of you. Remember, no organization that requires people to degrade themselves is worthy of your membership.”

Statements included in collage:

“I felt ill and said to the people gathered around chuckling, ‘This offends me on so many levels, I don’t even know where to begin.’” Linda Gush

“Remember, no organization that requires people to degrade themselves is worthy of your membership.” Linda Gush



Protesting the Vietnam War by Rev. John Ekman

I reckon I got my start in the dynamics of justice concerns with the Vietnam war. Of course, issues of racial and economic injustice were very much a part of the American scene before Vietnam; but I can confess, with humiliating chagrin, that being brought up in Northern Minnesota, my “social sensitivities” were not highly tuned with unpleasant realities.

When values (even questionable ones) are held in one’s psyche from a young age (or in the minds of modern *stop the steal* “adult” Republican voters!), correcting them or admitting that they are wrong is a Herculean challenge. I fear that my inability or unwillingness to integrate new experiences and obvious realities into my old “value” learning is NOT an uncommon human experience. For years my naive filter was: “*America is too good to do anything wrong.*” I am, after-all, an Eagle Scout!! So in spite of my extensive travels in Africa, India and the middle east; & in spite of taking my Junior year at the American University of Beirut and living with Samir, a Palestinian engineering student who lived in a UNRWA refugee camp in Sidon, I was never challenged to consider how Western colonial powers (and the USA) might have contributed to the injustice folks were suffering.

For a minister you’d think I’d say that “Meeting Jesus in the scriptures was a mind-altering experience.” I might have been meeting that Jesus challenge all my life; but I found my *justice footing* while jeeping around South America with 4 compatriots for 3 months during the summer of 1967. I chanced to take for reading a small volume entitled, “The Vietnam Reader.” It was a compendium of essays from different authors on the Vietnam war. Not to sound overly dramatic, but like Saul on the road to Damascus, the scales suddenly fell from my eyes and I realized a fresh truth that had been staring me in the face for years. My country did not do everything right, in fact we, like other human institutions, did many things that were short sighted, selfish, and tragically wrong.

In Seminary at Union Theological in NYC, I was granted a draft deferment. A number of young men went to seminary (just) to avoid the draft. I did not. Over the course of 1967-68 it seemed wrong that we should protest the Vietnam war from a

safe platform. If we wanted others to resist by facing down their draft boards and risking jail/fine time, then we should do the same.

Back in “those days,” it was OK if you left your Social Security card at home on the dresser, but *your draft card needed to be with you at all times!* (Go figure!)? I turned in my card at the Federal Court House in NYC and my Bemidji, Minnesota draft board wasted no time in calling me for induction. I refused and was immediately classed as a felon with a 5-year prison sentence and \$10K fine over my head. The FBI made a half-hearted attempt to track me down at my church in Setauket, L.I.; but the 85-year-old receptionist refused to give them my address. Word was in those days that many FBI agents coming from Presbyterian ranks were not in synch with the war. They never talked to me.

In an effort to “muck up the system” and provide a media platform for the war’s opposition, I immediately retained a NYC law firm to challenge the local draft board’s ruling. I became a lead debater against the war on Long Island for Clergy and Laymen Concerned.

Local seminary lore says that I was the first theological student called for induction in the US. There was a growing wisdom in LBJ’s administration that having a lot of middle class educated **white** war resisters in prison was poor PR! Eventually the Minnesota Director of Selective Services declared, “*A card was just a card was just a card.*” If they’d done that in the first place, it would have taken much of the wind out of our protesting sails.

Statement included in collage:

“In an effort to ‘muck up the system’ and provide a media platform for the war’s opposition, I immediately retained a NYC law firm to challenge the local draft board’s ruling. I became a lead debater against the war.” Rev. John Eckman



Speak! by Patricia A. Nugent

I'd never thought of myself as a stalker. But sometime during the Summer of 2017, I became one. First, out of curiosity; then, out of horror. Because suddenly, banners and flags were going up in front of neighbors' homes that reflected a cult mentality - a value system that violated my sense of democratic governance. My sense of justice and equity.

It was painful witnessing the beautiful landscape of my Adirondack neighborhood becoming littered with symbols of intolerance, prejudice, and even cruelty. Foul, threatening language. Rageful messages paying homage to a national leader who'd remained unblemished despite documented misogynist behavior and comments, collusion with despots, corruption, and greed.

Every day, I walked my sweet golden retriever past the ever-growing signage on what might otherwise have been a contemplative time. I felt deep sadness, fear, and disgust. Dolly didn't notice; dogs are lucky to not understand complex human language. But I felt complicit, walking by in silence. So, I began to linger in front of yards from where the messages of intolerance were being promulgated.

Stalking the messengers. My dog and I.

A neighbor was driving his trash cans out to the road; his yard sign supporting the autocratic leader surprised me. I asked, "What do you like about that guy?", to which he replied, "He's good for the economy." I asked, "Whose economy?" and raised other considerations as to his leadership, after which my neighbor questioned my right to question his right to support whomever he wanted. He slammed his truck door and sped up his driveway, spewing gravel back at us.

"That didn't go well," I explained to Dolly as we trudged on. "I just wanted to understand his reason."

A few days later, a Confederate flag sprang up in another yard. I didn't know the residents, but they'd always waved to us when we passed. Dolly and I hung around

until someone appeared to tend the vegetable and flower beds.

“Excuse me,” I said in a sing-song voice. “I’m curious about your Confederate flag. Can you help me understand why you’d be flying a southern rebel flag up here in the Adirondacks?”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” she sputtered throwing down her trowel. “I’m so sick of having to defend this flag. I only put it up because the colors are beautiful. That’s all! I don’t understand the big deal.”

“Well, it is a big deal,” I calmly responded, as Dolly stood by my side chomping a pine cone. “For many, it represents slavery, oppression. It could make some feel unsafe. There are other colorful flags to consider - like the Japanese flag, with a big red sun...”

She marched to her front door, slamming it behind her.

“That didn’t go well, either, Dolly,” I interpreted as we walked toward home. “But it’s important for us to find our voice. Or, as you call it, to *speak*.”

And it was. Because a few days later, the Confederate flag was removed and not replaced. Mine clearly wasn’t the first voice of opposition, but it likely served as the tipping point. That happens when enough of us speak our truth - *even if our voice shakes*. “Guess it went better than I’d thought,” I updated Dolly. “It was worth the risk we took, even though it was intimidating.”

Values are both caught and taught. I thought about my mom who, shortly after 9/11, stalked parked cars that were sporting American flags. When she asked drivers, “Did you vote in the last election?”, the answer was invariably *no*. “Voting is how you defend our country, not by putting a flag on your car,” she continued. Around the same time, when we were (again) headed into war in the Middle East, she limped into a military recruiting station to declare, “I hope you’re not recruiting young people to send to another country to kill and be killed.” The recruiter was astute enough to simply reply, “No, ma’am. We’re not.” She’d made her point. And in that way, she modeled having the courage of one’s convictions, to not stay silent in the face of injustice, even when the opposition can be threatening. Because some things - like

social justice - are worth getting into “good trouble” for. We’ll be in bigger trouble if we don’t speak up.

But Dolly didn’t pay that much attention. That’s why we need people to speak truth to power. *Woof!*

Statement included in collage:

“But it is important for us to find our voice.” Patricia Nugent



Some Final Thoughts on Justice

by Rev. Michael D. Bell

Good Trouble! John Lewis talks about the concept of getting into Good Trouble. Reflecting on his life and life accomplishments, perhaps Good Trouble suits him like so many others whose greatness was borne out of turbulent times. One of the numerous discussions that late John Lewis has relates to how power uses suburban sprawl tactics to create artificial barriers to segregate, exploit, and manipulate neighborhoods for control and economic privileges gained by unjust practices. Questions about who gets to use space or not are critical to social justice advocates. For example, is it okay to build shopping malls with grocery stores that lift the burdens of survival of suburbanites while urban residents face “food deserts” daily with no hope for healthy food access or employment opportunities? If Mr. Lewis was alive, the absence of boundary lines would mean that urbanites would be offered a means for transportation and employment opportunities because, as members of a larger community, the moral truth that we must achieve is based on what a just society might look like. The practices of segregation, exploitation, and manipulation are systems based on fear, and ultimately are unsustainable.

The people in Dora’s photographs look much like a middle-class family. Now, that might not be true, however, it has always been customary for those who survived the horrors of the scarcities and degradation of slavery, the idea of dressing up reflected one’s inner spirit celebration that one has arrived. As Dr. King would say, this is a marker of status and “somebodiness.” To dress well reached beyond status to hope, the hope that one day, “all God’s children got shoes.” Communally, to see another Black person or family dressing well gave hope to others that the reach of dignity was always worth the struggle. It reminded us of the goodness in life that served as a reminder that suffering and troubles don’t last always. Somehow, God would have the last word. This fact, alone, settled various arguments.

Living in the aftermath of the shadows of Woodrow Wilson’s focus on the “Whitening of America,” themes drawn for the movie *Birth of a Nation* made life for numerous Black families in the South harsh and unsafe. My father, a native of Athens, GA, and my maternal step-grandfather, from Macon, GA, fled to the north escaping the horrors of farm life lived in the residue of a south that had not surrendered. In the north,

granddad found work as a carpenter and mason. Dad found work in the factories. Opportunities were better, though the shadow of oppression remained. It is here, in Buffalo, that I was born during a very turbulent time. But like many poor from anywhere, poverty located us in an angry prison of human waste and subjugation – migration just meant a type of relocation, not escape.

Here's the reality: When we talk about poverty and the current state of our pursuits of a just state, we have a tendency of throwing around sums of money as if the public understand the context of the offer. The state wants to legislate a minimum wage increase from \$7.50 to \$15.00 per hour. Following the news, one might think that \$15.00 per hour was the worst battle ever. We're talking about minimum standards for human existence in the United States, not a maximum range request. However, if one might compare the value of \$2.00 in 1973, inflation adjusted in value to 2022, that same amount would be near \$59.00. Let's back up. A lawyer, who adds no real value to the lives of the poor is paid \$500-\$1000.00 per hour, with no impunity. But is the life of the one who adds no value to the suffering of the poor any better, than those who risk life for subsistence living? One goes to jail for vagrancy, but the other who exploits or denies the existence of his/her neighbor, God's child, becomes a Senator or President. Where is the justice in a system that is rigged against the poor and dispossessed? What rights have gone ignored in "We the People?"

Saratoga Springs, NY, a community that continues to live off the capital of its origins, as a colonial experiment, is firmly being confronted for its inhumane shortcomings. Yes, there stays an ugliness if the Revolutionary War, or what preceded it when natives were killed, raped, and pillaged for their land by those who flooded the colonies from Europe. So, what that the context for which Solomon Northrup was taken into enslavement in the state of Louisiana? So, what, that Black protestors in Saratoga Springs, as well as in other parts of the state of New York, cannot be afforded the same courtesies to protest peaceably as their White counterparts. Imagine if those who stormed the Nation's Capital on January 6, 2021, were treated with the same contempt for freedom as Black protestors everywhere? Imagine if the markers of hatred legislated in the early 1700s in NYS that denied Black people the same right to just say NO? Imagine, if we could erase the misguided judgments of Saratoga Springs' officials who stubbornly refuse to mature into a just society. Whose judges of old, marked by the stench of exclusionary preferences, might finally submit to what is the best in each of us – to be free? Imagine that?

Man! I would just like to enter into a court without witnessing the markers of imperial customs plastered all over the interior of the court that distorts the hope that justice is blind and inclusive, when it isn't. They need to take down those pictures and move them outside of the courts. If justice is for the people and by the people, then justice must be practiced not used for subjugation and subordination.

If justice means anything, particularly to those who claim themselves to be Christians, followers of Jesus, then any marker of oppression is not tolerable. Not here! Not anywhere. Because the best in all religions reflect an abolition of human abuses, it is necessary that we all see each other as a large human family connected by God. If it means something, then let us not just feed the hungry but let us work to eradicate the causes of such deprivation of the necessary resources of life for everyone. If America, or Saratoga Springs is to achieve true greatness, the systems of opulence and oppression must be replaced by the genuine care of all its citizens – not just a few. Let's give our children real security for their futures.

Like Harriet Tubman who championed freedom for countless slaves who sought freedom, or Douglass who inspired a nation of colonialist to look at itself to consider that misjudgments ought not cost America its right to dream, or DuBois who reminded us that judgment day is a real reality. Either way, "God of our weary years, God of our silent tears, thou who hath brought us far on our way; Thou who hath by Thy might, led us into the light; keep us forever in the path, we pray."

Thank you!

Statements included in collage:

"He talks about it a lot with what had happened with suburban sprawl and why the divide between space creates the justification to exploit and manipulate or manipulate and exploit." Rev. Michael Bell

"It is important to know that regardless of what the cultural boundaries might be, that we all have value." Rev. Michael Bell

“I don’t want to be just a critic. I want to be a partner in making things happen. We are all in this together. We have to work very hard to figure this out. Whether we are dealing with voter suppression laws, police reform or other issues.”

Rev. Michael Bell

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