



REVEREND CLARK OLSEN

"I view courage as an act of stepping out on faith. It is like crossing a threshold. You come to a moment that challenges your comfort zone, and you're confronted by a choice. The choice to do something, to take a step no matter how small is an act of courage."



Rev. Olsen talks about his experience with young people across the country. Below are excerpts from their letters.

VANESSA, 18

"Thank you so much for being scared but not backing down and being a silent witness. I really look up to the type of courage you showed at that moment."

VERONICA, 19

"I have been truly inspired by your courageous actions. I just hope that if the time came for me to stand up for others, I would be able to be as strong as you."

MARRAN, 9

"Thank you for your courage and your faith. Your strength to make the right choice instead of allowing the opportunity to pass you by is very admirable."

Clark Olsen's Journey to Selma, Alabama

The Courage in Taking a Step

Reverend Clark Olsen's journey to Selma in 1965 began when he heard Dr. King's appeal over the radio for clergy to join the efforts of Civil Rights activists in Alabama. King was calling for a peaceful protest in response to the chaos of the March 7th Bloody Sunday protest. Olsen's desire to participate was immediate, but the reality of traveling costs from California to Alabama were prohibitive. He decided he would not go.

Having told no one of his desire to participate in the Selma gathering, he arrived home to a message from some members of his Unitarian Universalist (UU) church. If he wanted to go to Selma, they would pay his way. With that barrier removed, Olsen made his travel arrangements. He had no idea stepping onto that airplane, that he would become part of a historic Civil Rights movement event.

Olsen arrived in Selma after the day's march had already occurred. There was to be a gathering that evening at the Brown Chapel, and Olsen was looking forward to hearing from Dr. King and the other leaders in attendance. As evening approached, he connected with James Reeb and Orloff Miller, two UU ministers he knew. They had made it to Selma in time for the march and had more information on what the upcoming events included. The three men decided to get some dinner at a neighborhood restaurant.

As they made their way back to the Chapel after dinner, Olsen realized that they were being followed by a group of men. His friends told him to continue walking and not look back at the approaching group. Olsen realized that the strangers were within arms reach of himself and his friends. He turned back to steal a look and saw the club as it was swinging through the air. It was the

cracking sound of the club connecting with Reeb's skull that convinced Olsen the attack was happening.

The horror of the night continued as Olsen and Miller attempted to transport Reeb to the hospital in Montgomery. They were followed out of town, the ambulance broke down, and sitting in the incapacitated ambulance a group of malcontent opponents to the movement circled their vehicle and threatened them. During the events of the evening, Reeb squeezed Olsen's hand and lost consciousness. He would never wake up again. Two days after the attack, Jim Reeb died from his injuries.

Many people had died during the Civil Rights campaign. However, it was the attack upon these white ministers and the death of Reeb that finally shook people out of their silence. The public outcry at Reeb's death provided the support and momentum that was needed to pass the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Olsen could not understand the significance of his decision to go to Selma and the events of that evening right away. Looking back, he sees it as an experience of small moments. Each moment was a step, where he had to make the decision of what to do next. Get on the plane to Selma? Lash out at the people who heckled him? Hold the hand of his friend as the pain overwhelmed him? Trust the people that offered help?

Olsen was not trying to make a grand gesture that would change the whole world. He was simply trying to take the small steps that were needed to change his own world.

Clark Olsen is currently the President and Senior Director of The Leadership Institute at The Elan Group.