

Here I Stand:
The Commitment to Social Justice of Reverend Aron Gilmartin
(January 12, 1910 – April 19, 1997)

Good Morning!

January 12th marked the 100th anniversary of the birth of our first minister, the Reverend Doctor Aron Gilmartin. Everyone called him "Gil," so I will, too.

Gil was a socialist who believed with all his heart in social welfare, a humanist who believed in the worth of all humankind, and one of the most ethical persons and hardest and most effective workers for social and racial justice that I have ever known.

There are not many of us at church who were here in 1975 when Gil retired, so I would like to tell you where he stood – his work for social justice, and, in his own words, the basic theology which undergirded it.

*Gil, was born in Boston in 1910. He attended the prestigious Boston Latin School, and Harvard University where he majored in world history, Modern European history and Russian. Gil described himself as a "proper Bostonian." I also think of him as a Rabbi, a teacher who taught **by who he was**.*

Gil was a young teenager when his family joined the Unitarian church. His work for justice began at that time when, influenced by Woodrow Wilson, he spoke to church youth groups in the area about world peace.

After graduation from Harvard, he took the train directly to Meadville Theological School in Chicago. While he was in seminary, he became interested in the plight of the Kentucky miners who were protesting against the despicable conditions in the mines. Gil organized the Student Bureau for Miners Relief, which expanded to eighteen college campuses. He joined the weekly meetings of the Chicago Committee for the Defense of Kentucky Miners. "There" he said, "I learned what commitment was about..." He later explained, Commitment, is doing what I can do – because I can do no other. Commitment speaks now as it always has, in ways which say, "Here I stand."

Gil was well into his eighties when Dr. Clare Fischer from Starr King School and I, (tape recorder in hand), interviewed him at his home in Walnut Creek. He was frail then, and had to stop often to catch his breath. He told us this story of his work in Harlan, Kentucky while he was still in seminary.

A rally was planned in Harlan to call attention to the miners fight for justice. Information was spread by word of mouth. Gil and two friends drove up to the mine, but practically nobody seemed to be there. The miners were afraid of the thugs hired by the mine owners.

We put down a box [for a platform], he said.. Suddenly people came out of hiding. While I was talking, the people, who had been sitting on the sidelines, suddenly stood up. They moved my companions.

I heard a voice say, "All we want is the preacher. Preacher, turn around." I turned around and looked right down the barrel of a rifle. The voice said, "Get in that car." The car was parked nearby. I got in, and my hand touched a pistol. I got my hands up in the air – and moved as far away as possible. He grabbed for the gun. I got driven away. He went into town, got another man – got a big, heavy rope.

He asked who I was – what I was doing there. They were fearful I might be a federal agent. They kept coming back to it. I never said it wasn't true. They talked about taking me to the woods and stringing me up. They stopped at a place where I could sit down on the rail. One stayed with me.

Talk about bravado! I occasionally smoked in those days. I asked for a cigarette, which they gave me – and matches. I know what my intent was – to light that cigarette. Come hell or high water, that hand wasn't going to shake. There was no quiver. I know there was no quiver what-so-ever....I had no interest in the cigarette.

They finally decided to take me out to Cumberland Gap, across the border into Tennessee. I could walk down the Gap to a hotel, they said, and wake them up....I got to the hotel – hammered and yelled – got me a room there. I called my friends. They said they would come get me the next morning – which they did. We then drove back to Chicago. I am almost certain they did not know who I was – and were unwilling to risk hanging a federal agent.

That ended that episode. It was my fifteen minutes of fame – but the newspapers wouldn't touch the story. I went back to Harlan years later. I just had to see the place once more.

The miners were tried for conspiracy to murder. A number were convicted. Gil took part in the pardon campaign. All were ultimately pardoned. Aron Gilmartin was a man of courage and conviction. He worked for what he thought was right – no matter the personal consequences.

Is there a social justice activity so important to you, that you would risk your life to make life better for others?

After a brief time as a social worker, Gil's first church was in Des Moines, Iowa. He actively worked to support organized labor in the area, and helped to form the Iowa Civil Liberties Union and served as its first president.

For Armistice Day he put his collection of peace posters on the church walls, and planted crosses on the church ground! [Gil would have been proud of the Lafayette crosses.] He belonged to a Unitarian peace group, and to the Fellowship of Reconciliation, which then, as now, works for a world of peace, justice and non-violence. But he explained that the focus of his efforts was not on peace, but on improving those human conditions which made peace possible.

A group of unemployed workers, organized by the Socialists, asked Gil to go to governor's office with them to be their spokesperson because they thought the governor would listen to him. Gil was 24 years old. His picture was in the papers with two "down and outers" as he called them. Major contributors to his church withdrew their pledge. There were bad feelings all around. It was the Depression, and there were no other churches to be had, but Gil resigned rather than cause conflict with the congregation. My radicalism caught up with me," he explained.

"Boston [The American Unitarian Association] would have no part of the dispute," Gil said, "They would not be sympathetic to a minister going out on a limb in that fashion." The Ministerial Fellowship Committee, which credentials ministers, had dropped his name, though he had fulfilled all the requirements at that time for final fellowship. They refused to rectify the problem. Gil left the parish ministry.

Under what conditions would you leave a position you loved – in protest, knowing it would be very difficult to find another job?

After several years working for Norman Thomas and the Socialist Party in New York, and for the Depression Era WPA in Boston supervising people cataloging Massachusetts church records, the head of the American Unitarian Association convinced Gil to re-enter the ministry.

Gil served the Unitarian Church of our Father in Newberg, New York [since renamed], and then the church in Ft. Wayne, Indiana. For two years there he had a weekly fifteen minute radio program, "Adventures in Religion." We heard David and Leslie read excerpts from one of those programs as our reading this morning. Gil began that program explaining his belief that "all persons have the right to make their own search for truth; they have the duty to follow wherever that truth may lead them"...And ended, "I believe that every human being has dignity and worth which no other has the right to violate. I believe the cement which unites mankind is love."

Can you articulate clearly what you believe? Do you?

After Ft. Wayne, Gil was minister in Seattle where he served as president of the state ACLU chapter. He spoke out against Joseph McCarthy and his Communist witch hunt. He fell in love with Eva Wilder, the chair of the church Board of Trustees. He left Seattle in 1960 to become the minister of our church. The next year Eve joined him here as his wife. Gil and Eve worked as a wonderful team. [Our first example]. He and Eve took into their home several wayward teenagers from the congregation, kicked out by their own families, often for smoking marijuana.

In June of 1965, the Mt. Diablo congregation had just received approval for the site plan for our first church building. In a sermon entitled "What Do You Want in a ... Church," Gil said,

I have sensed that there is a conscious and deliberate seeking out of the liberal church – because it is a church, and identifying with it signifies a commitment and a dedication.

There is a commitment – but not to some ancient truth or custom. There is a commitment to life and its constant thrust toward the future. And a dedication to an enfolding and enlarging truth – which changes and grows with new knowledge gained, and fresh insight and deeper understanding.

I have sensed, too, that there is a seeking out of the liberal church because of a deep – half expressed – desire or yearning for fellowship wherein one may have meaningful relationships. There is an outreaching of the self toward larger fulfillment and realization in an environment which encourages individuality and growth.

And I have sensed a release of the human spirit as men and women come together with a vision of the beloved community – and begin to live in its reality.

Am I projecting – for I do admit that these latter things seem more important to me than any building, or wonderfully planned programs.

They are some of the things I want in a church – and which I feel I find from time to time in our church.

What do you want for our church? Have you told our Vision in Action Committee?

In 1965, Homer Jack, Director of the UUA Department of Social Responsibility wrote to our Board, "On behalf of the entire Unitarian Universalist Association, I want to commend your Board for the extraordinary services performed by the Rev. Aron Gilmartin in connection with civil rights work recently in Selma and Montgomery...."

In addition to coordinating the UU activities at the march from Selma to Montgomery, Gil worked for fair housing in Contra Costa County, helped to organize a project by African Americans and suburban whites to further Black empowerment in inner city Oakland, encouraged this church in its successful efforts to hire an African American associate minister, and to affiliate with another one; and worked for Black empowerment within the Unitarian Universalist Association, running unsuccessfully for president of the UUA on that platform.

In 1975, after more than fifteen years as minister at Mt. Diablo, Gil retired. In his final sermon as our minister, he said,

...I was in my early teens. I had never gone to any church before. Then it was that I first read the Bible – parts of it – especially the parts relating the teachings of Jesus.

Wow! Did that turn me on!

I know now that I experienced Jesus and his message in terms of human liberation. Whatever else he may have said, what I heard was his proclamation of "freedom to the captives," "liberation to the oppressed." I responded to his imperative to "feed the hungry," "clothe the naked." I was stabbed awake by the question, "How can you love God whom you have not seen, when you do not love your neighbor whom you have seen?" I was excited by the realization that I have choices: moral choices, ethical choices, religious choices – call them what you will. Life was like that.

Some years later, when workers were trying to organize unions in the coal mines, and the steel and automobile industries; in rubber, and the textile mills, and the sweatshops of New York City; in the cotton fields of the south – these workers seemed to me to echo the imperative of choices: "Which side are you on?" they sang. "Which side are you on?"

Unitarianism spoke to this question – at least for me. Channing had said "I do – I must – reverence human nature." His sense of the worth of each individual human being, in whatever state or circumstance, beyond all the distinctions of sex and color and race and nationality, was most meaningful to me. I felt it was something I had always known, or at least that it had lain dormant within me, until Channing's words brought it to my consciousness. To me this idea...that all humans are of worth, became the central focus of my life. And the belief that gave principal motivation to all that I try to do...

Can you express the central focus of your life? Do you act on it?

At Gil's retirement party in 1975, speaker after speaker [Planned Parenthood, Mental Health Association, ACLU, UU United Nations office, Worker's Defense League – the list goes on] told of how Gil had helped to found, lead or counsel various social justice organizations.

Then there was a belly dance performance. The dancer, Rhea, asked to perform at the ceremony. She told how when no one else in the city would rent her space for belly dance classes, Aron Gilmartin let her use the church sanctuary. "He treated me with dignity," she said. Gil treated everyone with dignity.

In the years after he retired from Mt. Diablo, Gil served several churches as interim minister, then, with his wife, Eve, continued his community work for social justice.

The Reverend Doctor Aron S. Gilmartin died on April 19, 1997. He was 87 years old.

I will close with the words Gil used to end his last sermon as our minister:

My friends, – we have been here and are in this world for one another, to confirm each person as a unique human being – and to be so confirmed, that we may fully find ourselves. In this setting we are not alienated from one another – nor any other living creature – nor from this world that spins in space – nor from the universe – or universes – that have no end.

Take care of yourself. Love one another. Shalom May peace be with you.

Benediction:

*Commitment, is doing what I can do – because I can do no other. Commitment speaks now as it always has, in ways which say,
"Here I stand."*

"Choose to Bless the World."