

Preach the Gospel, Use Words if Necessary

The Life of Aron S. Gilmartin
(January 12, 1910 – April 19, 1997)
Arliss Ungar, Collegium 2009

The Reverend Aron Seymour “Gil” Gilmartin was born in Boston, Massachusetts January 12, 1910, the second of three children of an Irish Catholic father, Edward Gilmartin, whose family rejected his orthodox Jewish mother, Lillian for twenty years. His parents had only a high school education, though his traveling salesman father liked to read. Gil was brought up those early years unchurched, except for simple morning and evening Jewish prayers. He went by subway each year to his grandfathers for a Passover service which was said entirely in Hebrew, but not explained.

From fourth through eighth grade, he attended the oldest school in the United States, walking each day passed the Unitarian First Parish Church of Dorchester. At that time, he never went inside. He loved to read. He read forty-nine of the fifty volumes of the Harvard Classics before he finished high school. He graduated from the Boston Latin School, which he described as “a remarkable school.” This was a happy time for Gil.

He started attending the Dorchester, Massachusetts Unitarian Church [the Third Religious Society of Dorchester] with his parents as a young teenager. He was critical of the minister who he never remembers preaching about social concerns. Each Sunday there was one reading from the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) and one from the new, and a sermon text based on the readings. The sermons did not address the issues of the day – there was no present day application. Gil said, “I seem to recall that I began to think that I could do it better.” He went to the summer camp at Star Island, and belonged to YPIC, the Unitarian youth group at the time, where he often conducted the candle light service, but had no thought of becoming a minister.

As a youth of thirteen or fourteen, influenced by Woodrow Wilson, he became interested in world peace, world order, a sense of justice, and what made for a happy, peaceful world. He talked about peace to youth groups from various churches in the area. It was his first real commitment to an idea. He decided that “peace is a product of a fair, equitable social order.” Peace work was not the primary focus of his life work, but rather the focus was working for the creation of that equitable social order that would make peace possible.

In his March 1995 odyssey at the retired ministers’ retreat, he said,

I began as a very young teenager. I became strongly committed to the League of Nations

and the World Court. I became anti-war personally, and I became opposed to the death penalty.

When I graduated from high school in 1927, I was given a bible – with a beautiful red binding. I may have been influenced by my readings of Jesus. I grew in my sense of what Unitarianism is about. That Unitarianism was influenced by the writing of William Ellery Channing. That has probably been my grounding during my professional career.

He attended Harvard College, concentrating on world history, modern European history and Russia. When he graduated in 1931, he took the train directly to Meadville Theological School. “Meadville was conservative,” he said, “although there were two other social radical students there.” Sydney Snow, then President of Meadville, was against students doing social action. But Gil was an active member of the Socialist Party, working for the society he wanted to see. He stood on street corners, speaking out for justice and collecting money for the Socialist Party. He explained that he “soap boxed” two or three times a week all over Chicago. It was the height of the Great Depression, and the Socialists were grateful for whatever change they could collect.

There was tremendous violence in Harlan, Kentucky at that time. Miners were trying to organize against the despicable conditions in the mines. When the miners went on strike, they were evicted from their company homes. The mine owners tried to have strike breakers move into the strikers homes. Mine owners brought in thugs. There was a big fight. Miners were rounded up, charged with conspiracy to murder. Gil helped to organize a Student Bureau for Miners Relief. This was expanded to eighteen college campuses. He also joined the Chicago Committee for the Defense of Kentucky Miners, a community group of radicals which met every Monday night. “I learned,” he said, “what commitment was about.” Gil and friends took up collections, receiving between \$1.15 and \$5 each time to send to the striking miners.

Gil and two others went to Harlan, Kentucky to get attention for the miners. They knew they were in great danger. They took as little identifying information as possible. They made contact with the sheriff to let him know they were there. Gil tells the story this way,

A rally was planned, and information spread by word of mouth. We drove up to the event, but practically nobody seemed to be there. We put down a box [for a platform], 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. [The thug grabbed for the gun. I got driven away. He went into town, got another man – got a big, heavy rope. Hangings were not uncommon.]

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 [the car] at a place [in the trees] 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. That was my intent – to show that my hand wouldn't shake....I had no interest in the cigarette.

They then 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 had with me a Gideon Bible. "Oh, by the way," I asked them, "this bible belongs to the hotel [in Harlan] – would you return it for me?" He took the bible – then threw it away. He knew perfectly well why I gave it to him. He would have been identified. I almost got him.

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. (1996 Oral History)

Gil fought for what he thought was right – come hell or high water, or the threat of being hanged. The trial of the miners went on. They were charged with conspiracy. A number were convicted. All were ultimately pardoned. Gil took part in the pardon campaign.

Gil's thesis at Meadville was titled, "Some Collegations *sic* [linking together] of the Unitarian and Ethical Culture Movements in America," a reflection, perhaps, of his Humanist theology. Church history was the center of his seminary interest. Gil was a little resentful, I think, that despite tying with Henry Newman for the top grades in his Meadville class, he did not receive the highest award, one year's study abroad fully funded, because, they said, he did not devote enough time to his academic studies. He said that Meadville told him, "Do your studies. Do that [social action] stuff later!"

He graduated in 1933, at the height of the Depression. Churches were not to be had. "If you had a job as minister," Gil said, "you held on to it." Gil stayed in Chicago. He learned that he could study social work for one quarter at the University of Chicago, then do case work, which he did.

In 1934, he was invited to serve for three months at the Des Moines, Iowa Unitarian Church

which had a conflict with its minister. The Des Moines Church had no office, no secretary. The telephone was in the corridor. Gil related,

The ministry was lonely, especially in the early years. The distance between churches was large. Practically no regional districts, no meetings. They met for a day at the May meetings. All you did was go to the luncheon and hear a speaker. The dues were \$1. My closest colleague was the reformed rabbi. Unitarian ministers were excluded from associations of ministers. I had more ministerial support when I was not in the ministry.

The current Des Moines church web site states, “Another social activist and humanist minister served the congregation for one year, 1934 –1935. He was Aaron (*sic*) S. Gilmartin, and he not only actively worked to support organized labor in the area but also joined with a mild-mannered Quaker mathematics professor at Iowa State University to help form the Iowa Civil Liberties Union and served as its first president.” (<http://www.ucdsm.org/history.php>) The Iowa Civil Liberty Union, dedicated to protecting and preserving the basic freedoms, is one of the oldest affiliates of the ACLU. Over the years Gil helped to form several ACLU chapters.

He attended the first meeting of the Prairie Group, the Unitarian ministerial study group founded by several Unitarian ministers, including James Luther Adams. Members choose a topic, study it, prepare papers, and discuss it the following year.

He married Helen Lasker, a social worker. “She kept her maiden name,” he explained. Neither [of us] wore wedding rings.”

Ever the activist, he showed a series of foreign films at the church in Des Moines. They started with one from the Soviet Union. Someone threw a stink bomb into the church. After that, during the movies a church member with a gun sat next to the projectionist – much to Gil’s disapproval. He did not like guns.

The medical association held a convention in Des Moines at which Gil felt the speakers were degrading and patronizing. Angry, Gil delivered a fifty minute sermon on the lack of health care. He asked the congregants to either stay for the whole thing, or to leave before he started. They all stayed. He gave a copy of the sermon to the press, who wrote a story which hit the headlines. “All Hell broke loose,” he said. The Medical Association published a quarter page reply; the Board of the Church replied in the press to that, creating an on-going dialog. The head of the medical association was a member of his church!

For Armistice Day he put his collection of peace posters on the walls of the church, and planted crosses in the ground! He belonged to a Unitarian peace group, and the the Fellowship of

Reconciliation, which then, as now, works for a world of peace, justice and non-violence.

There were two major groups of organized unemployed workers, one organized by the Communists, one by the Socialists (workers alliance). The Socialists asked Gil to go to governor's office with them to be their spokesperson about unemployment, because they thought the governor would listen to him. He was twenty-four years old. His picture was in the papers with two "down and outers." Two major contributors to his church withdrew their pledge. There were bad feelings all around. Gil resigned rather than have conflict with the church. "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 AUA served the interests of the churches rather than the ministers." The Ministerial Fellowship Committee had dropped his name, though he had fulfilled all the requirements for final fellowship. They refused to rectify the problem. Gil left the parish ministry.

He went briefly to Terra Haute, Indiana to work for the Socialist Party. Terra Haute had been the home town of the famous Socialist and labor organizer Eugene Debs. There he met Norman Thomas, who asked him to come to New York to work for the Socialist Party. He left New York several years later, partly for health reasons, and went to Massachusetts to become head of the church records survey for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts – one of the great white collar projects of the WPA. They built an inventory of all known Universalist records in Massachusetts. There were several hundred people working on the project.

In 1937, he served as secretary of the Committee For the Defense of Civil Rights in Tampa, [Norman Thomas was Chairman], and secretary of the National Defense Committee for the Southern Tenant Farmers Union. His first child, David, was born in Boston in 1941. David, a Starr King graduate, now works as an advocate for those with disabilities.

A friend, Betty Sanger, told Frederick Eliot, then head of the American Unitarian Association (AUA), "It is a damn shame Gilmartin left the ministry." Eliot, who knew Gil when he was an undergraduate at Harvard, said, "I think so too," and asked Gil to come see him. They had several meetings. Sydney Snow from Meadville also helped to encourage him to change his mind. Gil went back to the ministry, taking the Church of Our Father in Newburgh, New York, the church attended by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's mother before her marriage. The church, now the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Rock Tavern, was founded on the estate of a granddaughter of President John Adams.

Gil's daughter, Alice, was born in 1942 while he was in Newburgh. "For two years," he said, "I was a den mother!" (After a long illness, Alice died of hepatitis in 1987.) In the summer, Gil was head counselor for a camp for underprivileged kids. In 1944 he was chairman of the National Executive Board of the Workers Defense League, which he had organized.

He was in Newburgh as the Second World War was coming to a close. In a sermon entitled "Victory to Peace," based on a book of the same title by Paul Hutchinson, written just before D-Day in 1944, Gil says,

When the final armistice is signed, and the great guns cease their fire, and the planes no longer take to the air with their loads of destruction, there will be quiet, but not peace... We can live in a world without war only so long as our conduct in that world is compatible with justice and righteousness, which are the foundations of peace... We must demonstrate by the kind of world we build after this war that we are deserving of peace and the fruits of peace. Peace is but the by-product of the lives we live and the things we do, individually and collectively.

There is moral law which undergirds our world. There is a moral order which is fundamental and eternal. If mankind is to escape chaos and recurrent war, social and political institutions must be brought into conformity with this moral order.

We move along the road from victory to peace by the decisions we make day by day. We know whether we are moving forward or backward on that road by testing our actions by the moral laws of the universe. In the last analysis, the road to greater and greater moral order in the affairs of men and nations is the only road which will lead from victory to peace. (June 11, 1944)

Gil's son David recalls, "I remember finding an old men's Raleigh bike in the basement at some point. And I think I have a photo of Gil, with the bike. My reconstruction is that he rode the bike between home and church in Newburg. Whether he used it more generally, for parish calls, etc. would seem likely, given the times, but I am in the realm of conjecture here."

After the war, he directed a youth camp picking currants for the Unitarian Service Committee.

After Newburg, at the request of the AUA, he went to Ft. Wayne, Indiana for five years. The church building was a big house, with a residence upstairs for the minister, and a place downstairs to hold services. He started a new church in South Bend, driving down every Sunday night for two years. It was funded by a parishioner and one other person. He started the civil rights movement in Ft. Wayne.

It was in Ft. Wayne that Gil began what he called "a wonderful, long, caring friendship" with

Charles Patterson. Charles, an African American wounded veteran in uniform, was refused a cup of coffee in a Ft. Wayne restaurant. Someone told Charles to call the Unitarian minister. He did. At Gil's retirement party from Mt. Diablo UU Church 30 years later, Patterson, who became a vice president of World Airways, related how when he was an embittered young war veteran, Gil befriended him. He saw first hand Gil's work in Indiana on the Race Relations Commission, articulating an action plan to eliminate Jim Crow; as founder and first president of the Ft. Wayne Urban League, and as founder of the NAACP in the city which was the national headquarters of the KKK. Patterson became a Unitarian. He later spoke several times at the Mt. Diablo UU Church while Gil was minister there.

Gil was also one of the original staff members of the Encampment for Citizenship, a summer youth program founded in 1944 by Algernon Black, a leader of the New York Society for Ethical Culture. The program was organized as a summer camp "at which young adults of many religious, racial, social and national backgrounds learned the principles and techniques of citizenship in a liberal democracy through lived experience." (<http://nysec.org/handbook.html>) It encouraged political activism and volunteerism and sought to educate its participants about civic responsibility, participation in government, and tolerance of diversity. Eleanor Roosevelt was a strong supporter of the program. Gil participated in these camps for 15 years, directing those on the West Coast. Gil introduced Charles Patterson to the Encampment for Citizenship. Patterson said, "I'll always remember that my workshop group [at the Encampment for Citizenship] was asked by Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt to write our version of a declaration of human rights. [At that time, Mrs. Roosevelt chaired that commission for the United Nations.] There were so many other Encampment experiences that spoke to the heart and yearnings of someone like me, fresh from that horrendous war."

In 1944 Gil was also chairman of the National Executive Board of Workers Defense League. 1947 Gil was an active member of the Unitarian Fellowship for Social Justice. He was president of the Unitarian Historical Society. (www.archive.org/.../yearbookofameric009870mbp_djvu.txt)

For two years he had a weekly fifteen minute radio program, "Adventures in Religion." In 1948, in his radio talk entitled "What I Believe" he stated [in the common language of that time],
First, I believe in freedom in religion....I am speaking now of the right of the individual to believe as he will, accepting this and rejecting that from whatever religion he pleases, without fear of excommunication, or punishment in this world or some world to come....I believe that every man has the right to make his own search for truth; he has the duty to follow wherever that truth may lead him....[Sophia Fahs contends that] the only purpose of the teacher is to develop the child that he may be able to arrive at his own decisions rationally and on the basis of all available evidence. This, too, is freedom in religion in which I believe. [Freedom in

religion] means freedom from prejudice and bigotry; freedom from indoctrination; it means freedom from fear and freedom from all compulsion. It means freedom to learn and to know; freedom to choose, freedom to follow one's own reasoning, freedom to obey the inner guide of conscience.

*Second, I believe in man....*I believe in man's capabilities, his potentialities....I believe in the inherent goodness of man, in contrast to the conventional belief in man's sinfulness....I believe that man is endowed with the power and ability and wisdom to understand and solve whatever problems may confront him in this world. I believe man has this capability within himself, that it is there to develop and to use....

Third, I believe that all things are composed in the natural order of the universe. All supernaturalism seems to me to be superstition and unreality....I prefer to believe there is but one order in our universe, and no power or existence outside it. I think this natural order cannot be said to be moral or immoral. I doubt if it has any purpose as we commonly understand the word. Morality and purpose is something which man imparts to his own actions.

*Fourth, I believe in the permanence of the impact of human personality in the world....*I believe in the immortality of personal influence....I believe that what a person is and does in his lifetime makes some impression upon the people who knew him, changing those people to a greater or less degree as the case might be. That influence is passed on as part of the vast social heritage of mankind.

Fifth, I believe in brotherhood.

I believe that every human being has a dignity and worth which no other has the right to violate. I believe that spiritually, all men are equal. I believe that there is a bond which ties all men one to the other, regardless of differences of race, or color, nationality or religion, or anything else. I believe mankind is united by a bond of brotherhood. I believe the true principle of the good society is mutual aid and cooperation. I believe in the power of non-violence. I believe the cement which unites mankind is love.

In recapitulation, then, these things I believe.

I believe in freedom in religion.

I believe in man.

I believe in a naturalistic universe.

I believe in the immortality of personal influence.

I believe in human brotherhood. (May 2, 1948)

David Gilmartin writes,

In Fort Wayne, I remember a setup in the cellar of a mimeograph machine and a small printing press which looked a lot like a mimeograph, that is, it utilized a rotating drum. Only, in this machine, the print was built up from cold type, line by line and locked onto the drum.

Dad would type stencils of his sermons and run them off. The printer, I think, was used for orders of service and probably a few other things, but was more labor intensive because each letter of type had to be pulled from a tray and, when the page was being taken apart, each piece of type had to be returned to the correct bin on the tray for next time.

Gil was a Socialist, but not a Communist. In a 1948 sermon entitled “Communism 100 Years after the Manifesto” he explains the writing of the 1848 Communist Manifesto by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, and the social conditions at the time and in the years afterward. He tells what the Manifesto says, and explains the difference between Socialism and Communism,

The Manifesto is a basic document to both socialists and communists. The two part company over the interpretation of the “prophet’s” words. They may be differentiated as follows: Socialism puts its faith in an evolutionary development and in democratic means of attaining the liberation of all men from economic servitude. Communism regards revolution and an ensuing dictatorship of the proletariat as a necessary period of transition to the future free and equalitarian society in which everyone would contribute to the common good according to his abilities and would receive according to his needs.

Today the word communism may be used to denote the interpretation of Marxian doctrine proposed by Lenin when he came into power in Russia in 1917....Communism has become identified and identical with the Soviet Union as it exists today, with its tyranny, and almost fanatical defense of the faith....

It is in the very nature of Communism to believe that revolution and dictatorship are the necessary tools for social change.

It is my firm conviction – and I believe it is yours as well – that evolutionary democracy is better adapted to bring men to a realization of their social ideals. It is not sufficient to say this, however. It is necessary to accept the process of social changes by evolution – and not to resist to the bitter end any change from the status quo. In other words, we must be prepared to see our economic and social life evolve into new forms by democratic process, if we do not want to see such change by revolution and subsequent authoritarian power.... (May 2, 1948)

Peter, his third child, was born in Ft. Wayne in 1949. Peter now lives in Milton, Massachusetts.

Gil was invited to preach on occasion at Preston Bradley’s Peoples’ Church in Chicago. It was the largest non-sectarian church in the US, with 4,000 members at its peak. It was a church open to all races, creeds and colors, preaching a kind of liberal religious humanism. It affiliated with the AUA, and later also with the United Church of Christ. At People’s Church in 1952, Gil prayed,

From the world of many things and many doings, we come to seek the unity of God. By many cares, by many pleasures, by diverse and selfish aims we are separated from one another, and divided within ourselves. The manifoldness of the world bewilders our minds;

temptations and perplexities break us in sunder. Yet in all the universe is no wholly severed thing, for all things are composed in the order of God. Nor can any of us ever find his own good a separate thing, apart from the good of all men and all nations.

We seek here for a time to walk in that world of the Divine One where all several persons and things may be brought to that accord of spirit which alone is our peace.

We welcome into the fellowship of this service – and our prayers – those who hear our voices by means of radio: whether in the confines of the home, or in an automobile along one of the nation's highways. In one spirit and with one accord, let us draw aside from the smallnesses of our daily lives – for...we would seek the enrichment and enlargement of our spirits.

The outer world of affairs is a hectic place – and we live such feverish lives.

May we learn to slow down that we may live more; that we may live through life instead of just going through life.

May we learn to look at all things lovely with a more quiet eye; that the flaming beauty of a single tree may kindle in our minds an unforgettable wonder.

May we slow down our feverish endeavors to get more out of each day. Instead, may we put more into each day by a sufficiency of strength and by giving more to other people by way of confidence and cheer.

May we learn to be less frantic in doing many things – and more considerate in doing things which matter most.

May we slow down that we may talk to one another more thoughtfully.

May we learn sometimes to be very still, and to come to know ourselves; that sometimes we may find joy in solitude – and peace in quiet.

We are reminded as we pray that it is our opportunity to uphold all that fall; and to raise up those that are bowed down; to assist all that are in danger, necessity and tribulation.

Let us succor the lonely, and sad-hearted, the forsaken and forgotten – in this big, impersonal city.

Let us comfort all sick persons; those in pain, and weariness and anxiety.

Let us be friend to all who are separated by distance and the fortunes of the world struggle from their friends and loved ones.

Let us embrace with a warm sympathy all who have been bereaved of family, or relatives, or friends.

To all of these, let us offer ourselves that we may be
comfort to the sorrowful,
eyes to the blind,
feet to the lame,
refuge to the fearful,
strength to the weak,

and saviors to the sinful. (April 20, 1952)

Gil served the University Unitarian Church in Seattle, Washington from 1952 until 1959. In a 1953 sermon at University Unitarian Gil preached on “McCarthy: the Man, the Method, the Madness.” He tells of Joseph McCarthy’s rise to power, his deceit and unethical dealings. He calls him a “slave to his own unbridled power.” He concludes by saying:

I am sick at heart to realize what this man has been able to do to the conscience and decency and sense of fair play of many of my fellow Americans. Our democracy is dead – if there are not people who cherish it sufficiently to fight for it in this sort of struggle as bravely as those who fight in Korea. Our democracy is already dead if there are not those who are willing to sacrifice their fortune and their sacred honor – if need be – to defeat this man and his ambitions.

McCarthy – and what he stands for and what he is doing and yet proposes to do – is a menace. He is a menace to democracy as we have known it in this country. He is a threat to every man and woman, who will not bow in servile conformity of mind. He is a menace to the spirit of free inquiry and independent judgment and of dissent. (January 25, 1953)

In 1954 he was the chairman of the Washington State ACLU.

At the church annual meeting in 1958, Gil asked the congregation to envision the new church building as something more than just a building. He said, “It must be a place where people may gather for worship, where children may be taught to work and pray, and where the community is enriched by its presence.” He fell in love with Eva “Eve” M. Wilder, a member of the search committee that recommended him and chair of the Board of the church.

He left Seattle and came to the Mt. Diablo Unitarian Church in Walnut Creek, starting his ministry there in January 1960. He married Eve in March of the following year. Eve was a speech therapist for the public schools who devoted much of her time to improving race relations and to peaceful settlement of disputes through arbitration. Gil and Eve worked for the rest of his life as a wonderful team.

Gil was Mt. Diablo’s first minister as the fellowship grew into a church. When Gil first came, the church “rented the basement of the Highland Building, for the minister’s office and space for church school classes. Services were held at the Walnut Creek Women's Center, and as the membership increased they met at the Red Cross Building, with two Sunday morning services....” (<http://www.mduuc.org/aboutmduuc/mission.html>) He was installed in February 1960. Rev. Dana Greeley, the president of the AUA, preached the installation sermon.

In a 1962 sermon entitled “The Church in Suburbia,” Gil said,

The Church stands as a witness to a way of life and a system of values. These are to be made explicit in the lives of its members. I believe that the churches generally, and the liberal church in particular, are out of sympathy with much of what they see in suburbia. It is their responsibility to give to life a deeper meaning and a richer significance. It is the responsibility of churches to help mold society and culture – rather [than] to conform to what exists around them. (March 25, 1962)

Gil and the church members were active in social action, participating in voter registration, street demonstrations, providing sanctuary for a family from Guatemala and one from Viet Nam. Gil, along with almost all UU ministers in the Bay area, went to Selma, Alabama with Martin Luther King. When Homer Jack became ill, Gil replaced him as the coordinator of all Unitarian action in Alabama, and the Unitarian liaison to Martin Luther King.

In March 1965, Homer A. Jack, Director of the UUA Department of Social Responsibility wrote, “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. As you know, our denominational involvement was massive, including approximately 250 ministers and 500 Laymen. I must, however, single out a few ministers for outstanding service and the Rev. Gilmartin is one.”

Betty Reid Soskind, a member of the church in the early days, remembers, “I Learned long ago from a master, the late UU minister, Aron Gilmartin of the Mt. Diablo Unitarian-Universalist church, all that I needed in order to succeed as an organizer activist. "Three things must never be forgotten, (1) "always make others look good," (2) "great things can happen if you don't care who gets the credit, and, (3) the best leadership is when that leadership is invisible to those being led." (http://cbreaux.blogspot.com/2004_06_06_archive.html)

In June of 1965, the Mt. Diablo church had just received approval for the site plan for a new church building. In a sermon entitled “What Do You Want in a (this) Church,” Gil said,

I have sensed that there are many things left unsaid – and feelings scarcely acknowledged. 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. (June 13, 1965)

The original sanctuary/office building and religious education building on the current site of the church were completed in 1967. Unfortunately the cement dust from the building construction worsened Gil's emphysema. He was in the hospital the day of the dedication, then took some time off to recover.

About this time, some church members were unhappy. In her history of the church, Beverly Scaff reports, "It seems as though the Board had been forced to deal with a lack of adequate funds for so long that little else could command their attention. For a few, the minister was seen as the cause of this – if his sermons were better, if he provided better leadership, more people would come and there would be more money. This created a certain amount of tension on the Board, and surfaced several times during Gil's ministry."

This was the time of the Viet Nam War. Beverly Scaff reported in her history of the church, Gil spoke often about the war in Vietnam. He went to Washington with 2,000 other clergy to meet with members of Congress in an effort to bring the war to an end through negotiation. Upon his return he gave a sermon entitled "Vietnam: Challenge to the Conscience of America."...While there were those in the congregation who did not share his views with respect to U.S. policy, Gil addressed these concerns in a newsletter article: "we are united in our desire for peace and freedom for the people of the world. We share the same commitment to human values, the same dedication to human life." (Scaff history)

In 1969 church member Andy Baltzo opened the Mt. Diablo Peace Center, then a committee of the church.

Gil's involvement in social action was recognized nationally. In 1967 he was chair of the Social Concerns Committee of the UUA. He served on the UUA Commission on Religion and Race, and as chair of the UUA National Advisory Committee of the Department of Social Responsibility. He served for many years as national vice chair of the UU Service Committee.

Under Gil's leadership, the Mt. Diablo Church had two African American associate ministers. As chair of the Pacific Central District Social Concerns Committee, he helped to found the East Bay Project for Community Organization for Urban Progress in Oakland. He served on its board of trustees. African American George Johnson left his position at the UUA to direct this program to help bridge the gap between the white suburban and the inner-city Black communities as they worked together for Black empowerment. Many church individuals donated their money and time. George was made a minister of the church in October 1967, but his financial support came from the project. Johnson left the Mt. Diablo Church in November 1973.

In September 1968, Harold Wilson, an African American who had been intern at Mt. Diablo, was called as associate minister. The Board recommended that he devote one third time to religious education, one third to administration and one third to human relationships, freeing Gil to "better serve our commitment to the community in the area of the Urban Crisis." The church raised the \$10,500 necessary for his salary in one week. He served through December 1969 when the money ran out. (Scaff history)

1967 to 1971 was the time of the "Black empowerment" controversy at the UUA. Gil was very much a part of the action, siding with the Black Affairs Council and their white allies. (See Warren Ross, "The UUA Meets Black Power: BAC vs. BAWA, 1967-1971" (<http://www.uuworld.org/2000/0300feat3.html>) and "A Timeline of the Black Empowerment Controversy in American Unitarian Universalism," compiled by Julie Kain (<http://pacificuu.org/publ/itow/timeline.htm>))

Gil remembered that a small group from the Mt. Diablo Church was discussing the UUA. George Johnson said, "Gil, you should run for [UUA] president." Gil answered, "You're crazy man." All the people there agreed with George. Gil checked, and decided that he seemed to have sufficient support. In December 1968 he announced that he would run for president of the Unitarian Universalist Association "to try to give our continental association a position and program relevant to the crisis in our culture and society, and meaningful to the lives of our people." Marty Dimbat and Dorothy White gave the first money to start the campaign. Pete Stark, now a US Congressman, let him use the telephone bank at his bank. Pete's attitude was, "Second best isn't good enough. Don't run the election to lose." The campaign was narrowly focused on "reparations" for Blacks. The Black Caucus ultimately endorsed him. The election was in 1969. Gil could get the Black support, but he learned that you didn't need it to win! Bob West won, Gil came in third. Gil emerged as a leader of the Black empowerment movement

At that time, the church had more Black members than it has had since. Gil remembered that there were less than twenty Black families in Contra Costa County, and half belonged to the Mt. Diablo

church.

The UUA Commission on Appraisal (COA) studied the controversy. Gil differed on a number of things they said. He felt that the COA was wrong on their negative attitude. He agreed more with the version told by Vic Carpenter in his Minns lectures.

Although most everybody liked Gil, some felt that though his sermons were good, he did not deliver them well. There were those who came to church most Sundays, but sat in the patio talking (the “sun worshipers”) and those who took life span religious education classes that were taught concurrently with one of the Sunday morning services.

During the time of encounter groups (small, unstructured church “therapy” groups), almost 200 people at Mt. Diablo participated, including Gil and his wife, Eve. Gil and Eve took into their home several youth of church members kicked out of their own homes, usually for smoking marijuana.

Although church services and programs continued to be lively and relevant, the year 1969 began a low point in the Mt. Diablo church (as well as in others throughout the denomination) with dissension on the Board, people not pledging, committees lacking members, structure and chairs, lack of adequate religious education, and unkept buildings and grounds.

In 1971 Gil received honorary degrees from both Meadville Lombard Theological School and Starr King School for the Ministry. He was one of the few people to have honorary degrees from both of our two UU seminaries. The citation from Meadville said, in part, "Faithful minister, valiant reformer, exemplar of freedom, you made the cause of oppressed people your cause...you have composed the music by which many have marched, and shown yourself a true embodiment of the prophetic genius of Unitarian Universalism." The Starr King citation called him “Courageous statesman of humaneness; enabler of congregations to plumb their depths of strength; ageless fighter for civil freedoms; intimate sojourner with all people at home and abroad."

Gil announced that he would retire in 1975. He was awarded an eight month sabbatical for 1973. In 1972 as the Board worked to involve more people in the governance of the church, the chair of the Board began a series of harsh criticisms of Gil, describing him as "psychologically and intellectually immobilized." His attempt to have the congregation terminate Gil’s contract was not successful, and the chair resigned from the board and the church.

Gil was one of the “additional signers” of the 1973 Humanist Manifesto II, which states, in part,

“We believe...that traditional dogmatic or authoritarian religions that place revelation, God, ritual, or creed above human needs and experience do a disservice to the human species.”

After more than fifteen years as minister at Mt. Diablo, Gil retired effective August 1975. In his final sermon as minister at Mt. Diablo UU Church, 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 – Channing had called it his “sublime 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....
(June 29, 1975)

Gil once 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.’” (*The Liberal Pulpit*, Vol. II, no. 1) At his retirement party in 1974, speaker after speaker told of how Gil had helped to found, lead or counsel various social justice organizations. They told how he:

helped to found:

the local chapter of the ACLU

the local chapter of the Mental Health Association

was:

Chair of the Board of the UU Project

On the steering committee of the Fellowship for Renewal

Chair of the Pacific Central District Social Concerns Committee
President of the Contra Costa Mental Health Association
Member of the Advisory Committee of the Department of Social Responsibility of the UUA
Member of the Board of:
 the ACLU of Northern California
 the Family and Education Therapy Center
 the Co-op Rehabilitation of Homes
 the UU United Nations Office
 the Workers Defense League
Member of the Advisory Council of the Retired Senior Volunteer Program
On the Advisory Board of Lagos West
West Coast advisor to *Religious Humanism*, the newspaper of the Fellowship of Religious Humanists

In addition to the speakers from the various organizations, and a resolution from the California State Assembly, there was a belly dance performance. The dancer, Rhea, who asked to perform at the ceremony, told how when no one else in the city would rent her space for classes, Aron Gilmartin let her use the church. "He treated me with dignity," she said. Gil treated everyone with dignity. (Gilmartin's retirement party, Mt. Diablo Unitarian Universalist Church, 1974)

When Gil retired, he resigned his positions in all these organizations for a year to really understand how it felt to be retired. In 1977, the Mt. Diablo congregation unanimously voted him *minister emeritus*.

After he retired from the Mt. Diablo church, Gil did interim ministry in Sacramento CA, Edmonds WA and in British Columbia. In a sermon in Washington in 1986 entitled "There is no Hiding Place," Gil said,

 The shame of the religious enterprise is that it has restricted itself too much to the sidelines of life: to the suburbs, the familial and the domestic, the private, the sentimental,... to the giving of identity and the soothing of anxiety. But certainly not to leadership in shaking up the structures of order.

 That kind of leadership requires courage; it requires, too, new modes of ministering to what actually shapes our structures of order: education – housing – economies and investments – law – government – military policy – urban-suburban affairs – race relations – police methods – penal practices – drug addition – alcoholism....

 Some may observe that I am talking "about the world, not about religion." I am not so sure of that distinction. I believe humans create religion, presumably to help themselves to learn how to live in the world, even though some use religion as an escape to another world beyond.

And humans create churches, temples and synagogues, mosques, presumably to help themselves to learn how to live here for others as for themselves.

Of course, the church must be a place of inwardness, a way station in time, where people come to renew the quality of their lives. To collect themselves, to regenerate energies. But the church must be something more: it must be what has been called “the interfering community” those who believe so strongly in the preciousness of every human life that they must interfere when human beings are being smothered, whether by air pollution, governmental bureaucracy, a school committee...an authoritarian state....

A church can live to itself only to this extent: it has an obligation to keep its own house in order, to be certain that no individual member is ignored or lost in its organizational machinery. But the moment it feels compelled to play it safe, to become pre-occupied only with its own survival, that moment it has begun to die – and may deserve to die!

In our country at this time the air is filled with voices of fear, and distrust, outrage and anger. Violent pressures within our society produce counter violence and counter pressure. There is more to come. The church has to fear these violent confrontations less than it fears the civil grievances and injustices which are eating the heart out of our social community.

Our path becomes clear.

Some years ago – when the 200th anniversary of the birth of this nation was celebrated I became disturbed – disturbed by what seemed to me a singular lack of expression of new dreams for the future...of a new future. And I wondered why it is seemingly so difficult to speak of our future in any way other than in preserving the past – and maintaining the status quo. We seem to be embarked on a policy of returning to the past. We are told the ideal may be reached by going backward – not forward.

Is this the way we really propose to deal with the ills of society – ? and of the world? Will the present problems and issues go away because we turn the clock back?

Have we – in this free and liberal religious movement – the spirit to dream new dreams – the faith to hope new things – the courage to try new ways?

Have we the will to engage the world and commit ourselves anew to change/and to transform our social and economic order in all the ways necessary to give respect to each individual human being, in all his/her uniqueness...that every human being may stand in freedom and with dignity, confident of and secure in his/her own person?

Our church – our religious movement – is one that does not find utopia in the Garden of Eden – nor in a heaven beyond some pearly gates. Rather, we strive to build utopia in this world – to make real in the here and now – the dream and aspiration of liberation and self determination, of freedom and equality, of human dignity and human worth.

This is the task, our task.

There is no hiding place –

And there is no turning back. (January 12, 1986)

Gil ended his last sermon as minister at Mt. Diablo UU Church, “Hail! Farewell!” with these words:

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. (June 29, 1975)

The Reverend Dr. Aron S. Gilmartin died on Saturday, April 19, 1997 at his home in Walnut Creek, CA. He was 87 years old.

In her book on the History of Mt. Diablo UU Church, Beverly Scaff, church secretary, then administrator for almost twenty-five years, says, “While Gil was sometimes faulted for not being a strong enough leader, his style of leadership forced us to do more thinking on our own, to make our own decisions, to take responsibility for our actions, and to build a community about which we could say, “this is our church, there is room for all who want to belong here...Gil's honesty and commitment to ethical standards was a source of inspiration to us. His deep commitment to action for social change gave us a sense of hope that we could build a better world.”

“Preach the gospel,” said St. Francis of Assisi, “Use words if necessary.”

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