

Peacemaker Award Acceptance Speech
Karl Mattson
April 23, 2007

I was honored to be here last year when two very deserving people, Suse Greenstone and Sam Mudd, received the awards.

Sam's response was very memorable: I have thought about it all year.
I picked up the trash, he said,
because I was angry.
Cleaning up the litter, he said was his version of footwashing.

Augustine has a similar assertion: Hope has twin daughters: anger and courage: anger at the way things are and the courage to make things different than they are.

I am very pleased to receive this award,
even if it is inaccurate and there are others more deserving, and there always are.
Nonetheless I find this award a kind of benediction for which I am very grateful.

I recognize that it is not only an award to me but a lot of other people,
some of whom are here tonight – people who shared work and visions -
and even more than that it is a recognition of the tradition into
which I was born
and to which I have been an unfaithful servant,
but a servant nonetheless.

That tradition was taught to me by my favorite uncle,
a seminary professor who was also an organizer for Farmers Union
and a devotee of the 8th century prophets, particularly Amos,
the same one from whom MLK liked to quote:
“Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an
ever flowing stream,”
words emblazoned on the civil rights memorial at the Southern
Poverty Law Center in Montgomery.

I can clearly remember, as a high school student, traveling with him from one
small Midwestern white frame church to another,
the pews filled with plain folk, families from small farms
trying to devise a strategy to resist the economic forces that were
driving them off the land.

Years later, a week or so after Marge and I were married, in our first job,

we went to work with some of those same farmers,
now dispossessed
working as migrant laborers, building the taconite industry in
northern Minnesota,
kids sleeping in dresser drawers and orange crates in small
metal trailers (it was a kind of plantation of Bethlehem Steel),
there experiencing, I think, the kind of anger Sam Mudd was
talking about.

My second awakening I owe to Brooklyn, New York.
Right after graduate school, in 1964, my wife and I and our daughter Martha
moved into a parsonage one block from the busiest intersection in NYC
where Flatbush and Atlantic and Fourth Avenue intersect.

Both my wife and I had traditional suburban upbringings where people of color
disappeared at sundown.

But not in Brooklyn,
Brooklyn, the epitome of American diversity,
viable communities of every immigrant wave to wash up upon these
shores,
the very people of whom Emma Lazarus sang.

Both my wife and I date our awareness of what it truly important to us about
being an American to experiencing Brooklyn.

Thirdly, as Julie has mentioned, after Brooklyn, we went to the south side of
Chicago, where we were the only white family in the area of 74th and Calumet,
to a truly historic church, Salem Lutheran Church,
which way back in 1949 had resisted intimidation and welcomed black
folk
when all the other white folk cut and ran,
and within 2 years that church had gained 1000 new black
members.

The people I worked with were largely middle class,
originally part of the great northern migration of five million black people
in the 1940's and 50's.

In those years Chicago alone went from 278,00 black people to 913,000 in the
later 50's.

It was there,
realizing that the young people in that congregation knew little about
the great migration of their parents, and even less about the civil rights
movement,

that I began to practice what we now call service learning by carrying black teenagers into the civil rights counties of Alabama, chiefly to Tuskegee Institute and to Greene County, the first county in the Black belt to elect an all black administration.

I remember the first project we ever undertook, deconstructing the outbuildings of a white farmer who had fled the scene to make items for a local senior citizen facility.

These words point to the main energies and events that have worked their way into my life

and indicate little forays ventured from the context of a grand tradition, a tradition that sustains a ragged little movement that believes that God's part in human life is justice.

When confronted by the immensity of contemporary evil Amos often cried out: "How can Jacob stand, he is so small?"

And yet, as Martin Bell said in his sermon about that ragged little movement: "And yet the beat goes on!"