Acting As If...

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto
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If you survived last night's time change, or take an afternoon nap, some of you may grab a bit of popcorn this evening, snuggle into a comfy chair, and watch the Academy Awards. Yes, it's Oscar night!

My husband loves movies, and it used to be that we would see many of the nominated films and performances each year at the theater. But, times have changed, so we've been taking advantage of our Netflix subscription and watching some of this year's nominees at home.

The other night, we screened the movie "Rustin" about black US civil rights leader Bayard Rustin. The lead actor, Colman Domingo, is a Best Actor contender. He gives an inspired performance and I thought it was a very good movie - not always an easy movie, but compelling and engaging.

March's worship theme is "transformation" - those times when a complete or dramatic change takes place. Transformation happens as a result of change, usually an extreme or radical change that causes a metamorphosis in the form or function of that which it impacts.

Transformation may happen planfully or be spontaneous, it may take great effort or seem to happen instantaneously. The process of transformation in our lives is often aided by the serendipitous - getting a chance, as we heard in this morning's story - but is also furthered by seeking out mentors, helpers, facilitators, and others who share with us their enthusiasm, their support, their vision, and their encouragement. Some transformations are quick, some take a lifetime, but all are characterized by responding to the call of vision or desire, a willingness to dedicate oneself to the value and truth of one's goals, and a determination that weathers storms and setbacks to try and try again.

As we watched "Rustin" I began to realize that he represents a model case for someone who made transformations in his life, and so I'll be using his example to talk about our worship theme today.

First, he heard a call and he answered it. All of us have dreams and desires, ways we would like to be or feel that we are called to be. This is not just for the young, because we can yearn and learn and grow at any age. Mr. Rustin felt his passion and said "yes" to creating and embracing the opportunities before him. Like our story this morning, he took the chances he was given.

The film is the story of a man, a country, a people, and a society experiencing the events of history on the bumpy road to transformation. Mr. Rustin was active in advocating for civil rights and equity from the 1930s through his death in 1987. You will remember these as years of dramatic confrontation and activism for improvements in employment, voting, and other human rights, especially for the Black community in the US. Many of us are familiar with the names of men and women who championed civil rights. People like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Senator John Lewis, Medgar Evers, Rosa Parks, Ella Baker. Mr. Rustin was actively involved, too and yet his name is less well known to many of us.

And that is the essence of the story presented in "Rustin". Born in Pennsylvania in 1912, he was raised in a large family by his well-to-do Quaker grandparents. He knew early on that he was gay, which, at that time, was illegal in the US and much of the world. He attended college to become a teacher, but found himself caught up in activism after attending an American Friends Service Committee training program. In 1937 he moved to Harlem and his political, religious, social and personal sensibilities led him to protest war, advocate for the rights of black, gay and other marginalized people, and battle segregation.

Second, he consistently practices what he wanted to preach. Mr. Rustin was sometimes "difficult" for others because of the strength of his convictions. He didn't back down. He sat in the front of the bus. He demanded change. He refused to compromise his values and we was willing to pay the price when he had to.

Through his involvement in a variety of black-led organizations, including the NAACP, the Congress of Racial Equality, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Mr. Rustin spoke, advocated, took action, got arrested, went to prison, and got beaten numerous times. He travelled to Africa and India, where he embraced non-violent, pacifist resistance in Gandhi's model.

One of the reasons for Rustin's somewhat "out of the limelight" role in the civil rights movement was his homosexuality, which he refused to deny or hide. This was a source of challenge for many of his brothers and sisters in the fight, and it certainly impacted his ability to be seen as a spokesperson for the movement. There was great concern about the impact of his being perceived, in the 1950s and 60s, especially as a "pervert."

Third, Mr. Rustin surrounded himself with people who would tell him the truth and he had a support network that helped bolster his belief in himself. There were many moments when he was discouraged and disappointed, and in those moments he sought out people he know would encourage him to try again.

His brilliance as an organizer, his passion as an activist, his ability to inspire action and his commitment to his cause were never in doubt. He put in the hours. He talked to as many people as he could. He used his influence. He was blocked and frustrated many times. His network of colleagues and friends helped him get up and try again. And he developed mentoring relationships with colleagues that helped move the civil rights movement forward when times were hard and the outcomes seemed bleak.

One was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for whom he became a trusted advisor, encouraging him to embrace non-violent civil disobedience and action as a way forward. Mr. Rustin's passion and determination made the 1963 March on Washington a reality. 250,000 people, mostly black men and women who traveled from all over the country, attended this event on the 100th anniversary of the emancipation proclamation to show their solidarity and support for equal rights. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964.

Fourth, he never stopped being curious, open to growing and learning. He was willing to ask questions, to take risks, to do it again. An open heart and an open mind are unstoppable.

He also learned the fine art of "fake it 'til you make it." Sometimes you just have to face the fear and do it anyway. Sometimes you have to act as if you are brave, that you know what you're doing, and that you have it under control. Like the child in today's story, he knew he "didn't have to be brave all of the time. He just had to be brave for a little while at the right time."

Mr. Rustin experienced his own transformations in life - from a small town young man to an internationally travelled and respected activist and community leader. From a gay man who was arrested and charged as a sex offender, serving time in jail for his homosexuality to an advocate for gay rights. A person that time and time again risked his own comfort and security and safety, to be an advocate, a spokesperson, and a leader.

I'll close with these words from Bayard Rustin:

What is needed is the realization that power without love is reckless and abusive, and that love without power is sentimental and anemic.

The measure of a great society is how it treats its most vulnerable members.

May you be blessed with transformation in your life.