

Remarks by Paul Kittlaus at the
Memorial Service for Albert Cohen * October 2, 2021

In his last years Al Cohen was a wise old man, smiling, sitting on the front porch of 696 S. Madison. He was a Yoda figure sharing his wisdom. He greeted everyone who walked down the sidewalk, who stepped onto the porch. He radiated love and wonder and he told great stories. I want to talk about a time when Al was a first class trouble-maker...the John Lewis kind, good trouble.

Al and I had our first conversation in the Spring of 1961. We were recently ordained to the Christian ministry by the United Church of Christ. We were just out of seminary, therefore we thought, smarter than those who had been serving the church through the years. He had graduated from the Naval Academy and Oberlin Seminary with time training on a submarine in between; I from the University of Missouri and University of Chicago.

We loved the church but in that conversation we developed an impressive list of what was wrong with the church, primarily how it was failing to bring its moral force to bear on the big issues of the time. Race, poverty, war, the city. And we were clear that it was our job to make trouble about it until we could fix it, both the church and the society. We must have taken some vows at the end of that conversation because making trouble and fixing things was our common agenda, our common mission for 70 years.

We gathered several other young ministers in the UCC and became such a pain in the butt to the hierarchy and other clergy that they called us the young Turks. That was Okay with us. We disrupted meetings insisting that we stop just paying attention to white people in the suburbs but including those Black and Brown

people in the city. We insisted that the conference make a bold public statement opposing the war in Vietnam. We debated. We did sit ins. But we finally, through persistence and persuasion, after three years, won the vote.

In that 1961 conversation we somehow missed the issues of the environment that Al became obnoxiously outspoken about. And were deaf to the rumblings of the women's liberation. Our spouses decided to join our group and forced us deal with it. They successfully overwhelmed our resistance.

Al basically held four ministries: Associate Pastor at the Oneonta Congregational Church, campus minister at Cal. State Fullerton and campus minister at Cal State LA, and as Director of the Southern California Ecumenical Council.

When Dr. King called white ministers to come immediately to Selma, Al and I knew he meant us. We stood in front of Brown's Chapel in the pouring rain listening to Southern Christian Leadership Conference staff brief us on the negotiation with the federal government regarding armed protection for the march. Then they deployed us to southern segregated towns to walk the town square telling people why we had come to Selma to march with Dr. King. The day before we arrived James Reeb, a Unitarian minister, was beaten to death in one of those towns. I'd like to tell you how brave I was but the truth is I was frightened. I kept telling myself, "if I die here, it is worth it. I am doing what needs to be done." Al agreed.

From Selma we flew to Washington to visit our representatives. We had slept in our clothes, probably smelled. We visit Congressman Ed Reinecke, who represented the district where Al lived. He summoned a photographer to record that he was

hosting people from his district. He did that before he saws us. He had been elected the Republican whip, a leadership position who is the vote counter. On the wall where we stood for the photo was a coiled whip in recognition of his role. Al stopped the photographer and asked that the whip be removed. He said, "We just came from Alabama where whips are still used on Black people." Brilliant, I thought. Reinecke's whip now has a new meaning. I commented to Al as we walked down the hall. He said, "It was an action oracle. The Old Testament prophets did that sort of thing."

My family moved next to the Cohen's in 1971. Al and I built a deck that connected our homes. Kids could check what was for supper at our house and at Cohen's house and decide who they belonged to. We hauled our laundry over the deck to use their washer and dryer. The families talked about what might happen if one or both Al and I got arrested in acts of civil disobedience. We were back up parents for each other.

To give an example of who Al was during that time I'm going to read to you the verbatim account of how Al and another friend pulled off a significant change that you are familiar with.

Al Cohen told me this story in an interview in 2009.

John Moyers was my successor at Cal State Fullerton. The skillful and articulate Black organizer in Chicago, Fred Hampton, had been shot in his bed in Chicago on December tenth in 1969. John is the only self-proclaimed communist living in Newport Beach at the time. So, Ann and I went down to spend an evening with John and his wife in Newport Beach.

It was raining, it was cold, it was miserable. There was a fire in the fireplace. And we sat around trying to figure out, in response to Fred Hampton's death, what was the most vulnerable white icon that we could attack in some way. And we decided that the Tournament of Roses and the Rose Parade were the obvious symbol of White America. At that point in time the Rose Queen and every member of the court were bobby-sox blondes with blue eyes--right off the silver screen. I think there was only one Black person in the entire structure--hundreds of people--of the Tournament of Roses. That person was Dan Towler, a professional football player with the Rams, who was a pioneer in breaking through some of these things.

We decided to appear on the lawn of the Wrigley Mansion in Pasadena, the headquarters for the Tournament of Roses, on Orange Grove.

This is where the parade assembles the night before the parade. Right after Christmas, we intended to challenge the Tournament of Roses on the racist image that they portrayed. And our idea was that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference wagon train should be included as an entrant in the Rose Parade. That certainly would be a symbol.

Well, these poor people in the mansion should have ignored us. But no, they decided to debate us--separately. The news people including TV would go inside and interview them and then they came out on the lawn and interviewed us. These would be side by side on the six o'clock news. Well, it sort of ended in a stalemate at the time.

Somebody threatened to burn our house down. My kids took the call here at the house. So, they were here huddled together holding each other up when we got home from wherever we were

right after this happened. But, what was the outcome? The outcome was that the next year they had Billy Graham as the Grand Marshall of the Parade which I thought was a kind of Elijah on Mount Carmel experience. Who's got more power here, Billy Graham, or these ragtime ministers? But. But, every year since then the court has been racially integrated.

In that same interview Al shared his account of his transition from being a Navel Academy graduate to being a campus pastor working for peace and justice. He told me that, "You and Tom (Lasswell) stayed on my case and kept me from sliding back." This is one example of how we continued to stay with our commitment, how we influenced and shaped each other.

I just want to reflect for a moment what happened here. What kind of man is it who believed that when Fred Hampton, a black, charismatic civil rights leader is killed by the police in Chicago, it has to do with him. He felt he must respond dramatically. He must find a way to say NO to this way of injustice between white and black people. He and John felt responsible. That was the attitude that the Young Turks expected from each other. Al was brave, clever, modest and successful in making a change in racism that we can see now every Rose Parade.

For ten years I worked on Capitol Hill in Washington as a lobbyist for the United Church of Christ. Al and I stayed in touch. He came to Washington for Peace marches and to visit Evelina Gleaves Cohen, his mother, who lived in Vinson Hall in Arlington, VA.

One afternoon he was heading over to visit his Mom. Janet and I gave him a ride. He suggested we come in with him to visit Evelina. We had met her before several times and went in. Her apartment showed Navy on every wall and surface. She was a magnificent hostess. Janet asked the wise question about all the photos on the wall of the long hallway. Evelina took Janet by hand and told her the story behind each photo. Al and I chatted.

When we got back out to the car Janet sat in back and Al in the front passenger seat while I drove. At one very vulnerable moment Al turned around to face Janet in back and said, “You know, I love this man.” He pointed at me.

Janet asked, “Why don’t you tell him?”

Albert blushed and said in an embarrassed voice, “Oh, I could never do that.”

My reaction to Al’s death is that I don’t know for sure who I am anymore without those occasional reassurances we gave each other. These words were never actually said but our friendship carried this message: “We’re young Turks. Our job is to make trouble, to seek justice.”

Proposal lets establish the Albert G. Cohen Memorial Forest. Everybody go home and plant a tree. Do it for Al. Then you will remember Al every New Years Day when you watch the Rose Parade and every time you walk past the tree that you planted in the Cohen Forest.
