THE FOUNDATION

In August 2013 I traveled from Seattle to stand on sacred ground in Montgomery, Alabama. It was in this city that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat in 1955 and that Martin Luther King Jr., then 25 and a local pastor, led a 381-day bus boycott that produced the first grassroots victory of the civil rights movement. And it was at the city’s Greyhound Bus Terminal that white and black Freedom Riders in 1961, most of them college students, were beaten for trying to integrate interstate bus travel—even though the U.S. Supreme Court had several times declared segregation illegal. And it was at the Alabama State Capital in this city in 1965 that King and civil rights advocates—on their third try, after initially being beaten by state troopers—completed their 54-mile march from Selma in support of the right to vote.

I had come east and south with three former UW students, on a civil rights pilgrimage. We wanted to see places where heroes had stood, where profound courage had been demonstrated, where people in authority had relented only when compelled. We visited 15 states and 10 state capitals, starting at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. and ending in Little Rock, Arkansas, where nine teenagers in 1957 showed will and fortitude beyond their years in integrating Central High School.

All of this was so profound that I am now committed to sharing this experience with others—specifically, Seattle-area adults and university faculty and students. In March 2014 I led 31 of them on a week-long pilgrimage, and in October 2014 I led 41 more. In 2015 I am leading two more trips and both of them are already sold out. I am committed to leading two trips a year, at least through spring 2018. A pilgrimage is not a vacation: it is an intentional journey of deep substance and meaning, in which people seek to learn, grow, and to understand in transformative ways. A pilgrimage is a trip in which we seek to be changed in ways that will better us and the world.

There are at least three reasons to take such a trip to the South in a pilgrimage mindset.

1. It is powerful to see the narratives that connected the distinct people and events in the movement. The killing of Emmitt Till in Mississippi in August 1955, for example, impacted Rosa Parks’ decision in December five months later to not give up her seat on a bus in Alabama. Acts and words were connected. Similarly, there were clear strategies that underlie the actions—strategies that show the brilliance, challenges, and moral positioning of the movement. In seeing the narratives that connect things across time, we are able to place ourselves into those stories decades years later. That’s one value of the pilgrimage: to give people a chance to see the big-picture and to place ourselves in it. One way to make this happen is to adopt, as best as possible, a chronological approach to the sites we see. In doing this, the story builds, unfolds, rises and falls, and we come to understand—and to see our responsibilities—in a much better way.

2. The movement consisted of many different kinds of people. The predominant group was Southern black Americans, living in the key cities of Atlanta, Birmingham, Montgomery, Jackson, Selma, Memphis, and Little Rock. Among these folks there were leaders, often clergy: foot soldiers who showed up every day; children; college students; military veterans; and the legal teams. Beyond these groupings were northerners, Jewish Americans, people from abroad (one instrumental Freedom Rider was from Germany), Southern white allies, and many others. Seeing the ranges of people, and seeing how they all had an impact, is a second value of the pilgrimage. We all have parts to play, and it is powerful to see the choices that people made; the courage they demonstrated, and also to be presented with the motives for the resistance or the ways today that people have come to terms with what happened. The movement and its opponents consisted of millions of Americans making or being forced to make choices. Having us see this history impacts how we make our own choices moving forward.
3. The movement operated in localized ways that are valuable to understand. There were mass boycotts in some places, mass confrontations at others, and sometimes it was one person, seemingly alone. Sometimes the approach was political, sometimes it was economic, sometimes it was religious, sometimes it was loud, sometimes it was very quiet, sometimes it was angry, and many times it was defined by love. How things played out in Selma, Alabama are distinct from how they played out in Philadelphia, Mississippi. How it unfolded at University of Mississippi is distinct from what happened at University of Alabama. Understanding how the movement always pushed for and demanded freedom and dignity, yet adapted to localized cultures is powerful to understand. It gives us a charge to adapt our approaches yet to never abandon the broader principles that give our lives a moral purpose. We are both challenged and empowered by seeing this adaptive nature of the civil rights movement.

DATES
People are welcome to fly early or stay longer, but in general people fly into a destination (e.g. Atlanta, Birmingham) on Day One and depart late evening on the Final Day. People book and pay for their own flights, and all participants are asked to commit to the full itinerary.

DAILY RHYTHMS
Coach bus: seats 56, we take 50
Hotels: Hampton Inn or Holiday Inn Express
Breakfasts: at hotels
Lunches: box lunches on road
Dinners: TBD on road, usually some kind of gathering; costs billed at end of trip, not fancy
Typical schedule
Commences at 7 am, ends at 10-11 pm
Touring via bus and walking + talking, often 3-4 site visits a day
Meet with Movement footsoldiers, some leaders, many locals
Bus rides of a couple hours at a time

PARTICIPANTS
Leadership Team: 5-10, including
David Domke, Professor and Chair of Communication, UW
Jonathan Lewis, global Kingian nonviolence leader
Arianna Aldebot, Director of Student Leadership, UW Communication
Tim Jones, Professor and Chair of Political Science, Bellevue College
Erika Samson, Program Manager, UW Center for Communication, Difference, & Equity
Mark Pearson, Brothers Four singer and performer

Seattle adults: 25
Undergraduate students: 16-18

COSTS PER PERSON
Total:
• Airfares booked separately by participants ~$600
• for the spring pilgrimages $3400 (shared hotel room) OR $3810 (single hotel room), covers hotel rooms, bus, lunches, tours + speakers, and UW tax-deductible donation of $1000 to fund student participants
• for the autumn pilgrimages $3150 (shared hotel room) OR $3510 (single hotel room), covers hotel rooms, bus, lunches, tours + speakers, and UW tax-deductible donation of $1000 to fund student participants

ITINERARY
The civil rights pilgrimage includes visits to these locations:
• In Alabama: Birmingham, Tuscaloosa, Montgomery, Selma
• In Arkansas: Little Rock
• In Tennessee: Memphis
• In Mississippi: Greenwood and Money, Ruleville, Oxford, Jackson, Philadelphia

We meet with footsoldiers, leaders, tour guides, and locals. The “teachers” are the places + people we visit AND the people on our pilgrimage. This trip is not a series of lectures; it’s meeting, seeing, talking, listening, singing, reflecting, and seeking.