



# UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK  
Spirituality · Community · Justice

## **The Poor People's Campaign: Then & Now**

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

27 May 2018

[frederickuu.org](http://frederickuu.org)

Almost two months ago, close to one hundred members and friends of this congregation boarded two large buses to attend the March for Our Lives. Along with hundreds of thousands of others, we converged on our nation's capital to protest the epidemic of mass shootings in our county, particularly in our schools.

The March for Our Lives was one step in a process of creating social change, which will also require registering more people to vote and getting them to the polls to support politicians willing to pass legislation to prevent gun violence. There is good news on that front: **it turns out you can vote at age 18, and we have a wave of young activists ready to cast their first ballots!**

One of the reasons I am bringing up the March for Our Lives this morning is that among the many powerful moments that I remember from that day, one of the aspects that most stood out to me is that, **by far, the most frequently-quoted person was The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Of course, it's one thing to quote Dr. King. It's another to be Yolanda King, his 9-year-old granddaughter, who gave one of the many moving speeches given that day. As a 4th grader who has become all too accustomed to practicing lockdown drills, she said, **“My grandfather had a dream that his four little children would not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. I have a dream that enough is enough, and this should be a gun-free world, period.”**

Tomorrow is Memorial Day, an important annual holiday on which to remember and honor the memory of all who have died while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces. And although there are cynical forces who try to paint prophetic calls for change as being anti-solider, I would invite you to consider that the young Miss King's dream of a gun-free world is not incompatible with honoring all who have sacrificed their lives in the past in the cause of military service. Would it not be a better world if no one had to die in military violence? But I would be content with a starting point of commonsense gun laws that keep weapons of mass destruction off our streets.

For now though, on this Memorial Day weekend, I would like to invite us to spend a few minutes reflecting a little deeper on the legacy of Dr. King which nine-year-old Yolanda King invoked. It turns out that the young Miss King was not the first King to expand the dream from dismantling racism to dismantling militarism. And while Dr. King never ceased his concern with dismantling racism and white supremacy, in the final years of his life he was increasingly vocal about the vital need to address the ways that systematic oppressions intersect. Perhaps the most famous example is the sermon he delivered at the historic Riverside Church in New York on April 4, 1967, precisely one year before his assassination. In this sermon, titled "Beyond Vietnam," Dr. King addressed what President Eisenhower called the "Military-Industrial Complex," a formidable union of defense contractors and American armed forces." In King's words, **"A nation that spends more on its military than on social justice is a nation approaching spiritual death."**

A few months later, Dr. King announced plans for a Poor People's Campaign in the summer of 1968, although he was killed before his plans could come to fruition. As King expanded the scope of his activism, there were major figures, both black and white, who denounced this shift and encouraged him to keep his focus solely on civil rights. But King was determined to move forward with his expanded dream.

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the original Poor People's Campaign, and a week before we boarded buses in the UUCF parking lot to the March for Our Lives, we gathered in this sanctuary on a Sunday afternoon for a town hall meeting related to this new Poor People's Campaign.

If you go back and study Dr. King's dream for building the Beloved Community, he spoke not only about what it would look like—"a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth"—but also the three stumbling blocks that routinely prevent us from turning our dreams into deeds. Dr. King used to say that **the triple threats to Beloved Community that most consistently hold us back are racism, materialism, and militarism**. King believed that overcoming these triple threats will require three major shifts:

1. Moving from tribalistic practices of "discrimination, bigotry, and prejudice" (of which racism is one major example) to respecting the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings as part of one human family.
2. Moving from widespread "poverty, hunger, and homelessness" to an "international standard of human decency" that will not tolerate the preventable suffering of our fellow human beings.
3. Moving from the use of military power to resolving disputes with diplomacy, "peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries."

Fifty years later, the new Poor People's Campaign is seeking to carry forward the entirety of Dr. King's original vision, as well as to update it for the twenty-first century. Consider, for instance, that the first Earth Day was not until April 1970, almost two years after King was killed. So the new Poor People's Campaign expands Dr. King's original triple threats to Beloved Community into five areas: (1) systemic racism, (2) poverty, (3) the war economy, (4) ecological devastation, and (5) the nation's distorted morality.

The charismatic leader at the forefront of the new Poor People's Campaign is The Rev. Dr. William Barber. I preached about Rev. Barber before, after his important book The Third Reconstruction was published. If you ever get a chance to hear him preach, I highly recommend your going. There are also clips of him widely available online.

If you are interested in getting more involved, you can sign up for more information online at [poorpeoplescampaign.org](http://poorpeoplescampaign.org). Starting a few weeks ago through late

June, there will be regular opportunities—including this Tuesday!—for protest and civil disobedience at both the federal level and in state capitals across the country:

A second phase of the campaign will focus on voter registration, building a broader network, and creating a detailed list of policy demands, which will be released late in the summer.... But they do not plan to endorse candidates or to cast their lot with either of the major political parties. (Cobb 18-19).

Like Dr. King’s famous “Beyond Vietnam” sermons, Dr. Barber has also spoken out about the ways the war economy is holding us back from building the world we dream about. He has said his recommended actions would include not only “cutting spending for war and on defense contractors, but also foreign military aid and the militarization of U.S. police forces, particular those patrolling minority communities.” This last position is often cynically critiqued as an attack on our soldiers, which is the opposite of Dr. Barber’s intent. He is clear that **his concern is not with the private in the U.S. military, who “earns less than \$30,000” a year, but with the average CEO of a military contractor who earns \$19 million a year**” (Gruenberg 3). Barber, the son and grandson of veterans, is also clear that, “Reversing militarism also has to include diverting more money to the Veterans Administration’s medical system, to care for the medically, mentally, and psychologically wounded veterans of U.S. wars” (4).

We must reject attempts to conflate legitimate critiques of the Military-Industrial Complex with illegitimate attacks on soldiers. This confusion is similar to the conflict continuing to play out in headlines this past week about the decision of NFL team owners to fine teams whose players kneel during the national anthem. As my colleague The Rev. Jake Morrill has written:

The team owners made mention of what they called “patriotism.” So, it seems a good time to reflect on the difference between patriotism and nationalism. Patriotism is a noble virtue, the willingness to sacrifice oneself for the ideals and the people of your country. Nationalism is not only despising other nations; internally, it’s also despising anyone and anything that slows or opposes the consolidation of power within a country.

**Patriotism welcomes dissent** (as a healthy test of its basic principles).

**Nationalism suppresses dissent** (since it no longer engages questions of right and wrong...or really, any questions at all). **Patriotism, which comes from the heart, can be inspired in others. Nationalism, which comes from fear, must be always enforced.**

Football players aren't kneeling out of hatred for the flag or their country—but to protest the *gap* between the values the national anthem represents about the “land of the free and the home of the brave” *and* the reality of racism and white supremacy. The bumper sticker version of this difference is that *nationalism* says, “God bless America! And no place else!”—whereas a healthy, self-differentiated *patriotism* says, “I love my country, but I think we should start seeing other people.”

This Memorial Day weekend, as we remember and honor the memory of all who have died while serving in the U.S. Armed Forces, may we recognize the difference between supporting our *military* and supporting *militarism*—the false belief that weapons and aggression are ever our first and best tool. For anyone interested, a great read along these lines is Ronan Farrow's new book [War on Peace: The End of Diplomacy and the Decline of American Influence](#).

For now, in closing, I will mention one more book—a classic. Dr. King, in what we now know was the final year of his life, published a final book titled, [Where Do We Go from Here? Chaos or Community?](#) Fifty years later, that question is as relevant as ever. Clearly, there are leaders in our country today who are intent on choosing *chaos*, and exploiting fear and resentment to sow seeds of division. But there is another way. The Poor People's Campaign—both then and now—challenges us to consider that if we are to choose beloved community, then it will require us to address the stumbling blocks that have most consistently held us back: (1) systemic racism, (2) poverty, (3) the war economy, (4) ecological devastation, and (5) the nation's distorted morality.

The road before us is not easy, but I am grateful to be with you on the journey.