

# White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church

## Boomers and Stickers

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**FIRST READING**

*from Martin Niemoeller, German pastor imprisoned by the Nazis*

First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—  
 Because I was not a Socialist.  
 Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—  
 Because I was not a Trade Unionist.  
 Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
 Because I was not a Jew.  
 Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

**SECOND READING**

*from Ricardo Levins Morales, Minnesota artist (excerpt)*

First you stopped and frisked the young, the dark and the poor,  
 but I know what that's about and I joined with them in protest.  
 Then you came for the immigrants  
 but I am also an immigrant and I refused to stand aside.  
 You came then for the queers, the gender variant and the non-conforming,  
 but I was onto your game and we linked our arms together and sang.  
 Every time you came, my heart raced and my legs trembled,  
 but it became easier with practice.  
 When you came for the teachers I laughed out loud and shouted,  
 "You're joking, right?"  
 But you had only just begun.  
 You came after elders on the rez defending the water;  
 the whistleblowers exposing your crimes;  
 the Earth-defenders blocking your roads of plunder and for the very lands on which they stood;  
 For the injured, the poisoned, the neuro-diverse and the homebound, the differently abled and the  
 unexpected;  
 For the workers on whose backs and necks your wealth is built;  
 For the victims of your unending wars - demanding only to live.  
 In fact, you came after all the targets of your limitless greed wherever we stand up or speak out.  
 But their heartbeat is my heartbeat and their song is my song.  
 Our lives cannot be separated.

## Boomers and Stickers

*First you stopped and frisked the young, the dark and the poor,  
but I know what that's about and I joined with them in protest.*

*Then you came for the immigrants  
but I am also an immigrant and I refused to stand aside.*

*You came then for the queers, the gender variant and the non-conforming,  
but I was onto your game and we linked our arms together and sang.*

*Every time you came, my heart raced and my legs trembled,  
but it became easier with practice.*

You know, the *you* in this poem is not a single person. Don't misunderstand or rest easy in the simplistic, wrong assumption that the *you* in this poem is a single person or a single first-year President or any elected official or political party or even corporate executive. The *you* in this poem, the perpetrator, is way bigger than that; it's a systemic enemy of the people with many, many accomplices, and we could each of us, or most of us, recite these lines into a mirror sometimes and not be too far off the mark.

*Then they came for the Jews and because I was not a Jew, I did not speak out.*

This has been going on for a long, long time. This is about a system of inequity and poverty and violence, and the silence that enables them, and it's not new, only exacerbated in our time. Ricardo Levins Morales says:

*You came for the elders on the rez, protecting the water.  
You came for the workers on whose backs and necks your wealth is built,  
and all the targets of your limitless greed...  
but wherever we stand up or speak out,  
their heartbeat is my heartbeat and their song is my song.  
Our lives cannot be separated.*

That, to me, is a theology for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. A theology bold enough, old enough, plain enough to hold our palpable fear, our righteous outrage, our breathtaking diversity of experience, race, class, gender, creed and politics, and also our hope, our faith, our joy, and our steadfast intention to be true to what is holy. *Their heartbeat is my heartbeat and their song is my song. Our lives cannot be separated.* The poet is not a Unitarian Universalist, but that, to me, is a theology fit for our time, not new at all, but worthy of renewal, rededication – and this is a mighty discipline, to follow your true heart like that.

Ruby Sales is a writer, a theologian, who has been fighting the good fight in our country for a long time, even before 1965 when she was 17 years old, walking on a street in Alabama with her friends. That day, a white man on the sidewalk (a part-time police officer) aimed a gun at her and pulled the trigger, and in that split-second of a moment, another white man, a young ministry student who was her friend, saw, and threw himself in front of her, and died right there at her feet. Since that day, Ruby Sales has been fighting, not only for the civil rights of black people, but for the human rights of all people, poor people, white people, black people, all people, anyone, all of us, whose souls are sometimes lost and worn right down within this economic,

ecological, social system in America which holds such bright promise, and yet can be so mean – “mean” being another word for unjust, immoral and unholy.

Ruby Sales came to Minneapolis last summer and said this in an interview:

*How can we develop a theology or theologies in a 21<sup>st</sup>-century capitalist technocracy where only a few lives matter? How do we raise people up from disposability to essentiality? This goes beyond the question of race. What is it that public theology can say to the white person who is heroin-addicted because they feel their life has no meaning because of the trickle-down impact of whiteness in the world today? I don't hear anyone speaking to the 45-year-old white person in Appalachia who is dying of a young age, who feels like they've been eradicated, because their whiteness is so much smaller today than it was yesterday. Where is the theology that redefines for them what it means to be fully human? What do you say to someone who has been told that their whole essence is whiteness and power and domination, and when that no longer exists, then they feel as if they are dying? We talk a lot about black theologies, but we've got a spiritual crisis in white America. I want a theology that begins to deepen people's understanding about their capacity to live fully human lives and to touch the goodness inside of them, rather than call upon the part of themselves that's not relational. As a black person, I want a theology that gives hope and meaning to all people who are struggling ...*

*She goes on, I grew up believing that I was a first-class human being. Our parents were spiritual geniuses who gave us a counterculture of black folk religion that that taught us about dignity and also taught us something serene about love. “Hate” was not anything in our vocabulary.*

And she goes on to talk more about hate, and demonization, in our own politics now, from the right and from the left. She says there can be no room for it, even now and especially now, because it has no spiritual anchor, no matter how righteous the cause. She calls it “displaced whiteness,” blaming the other instead of seeking solutions. She says, *What it means to be humans is we live in a very diverse world, and we must always speak with the simultaneous tongue of universality and particularities. We've got to wrap our consciousness around a world where people bring to the world vastly different histories and experiences, but at the same time, a world where we experience grief and love in some of the same ways. So how do we develop theologies that weave together the “I” with the “we” and the “we” with the “I”?*

Her question is timely for us. How wide can we cast that circle of “we?” How can we re-examine our dichotomies of identity (white/black, progressive/reactionary, liberal/conservative or ultra-conservative) and think more about orientations of the heart and yearnings of the spirit, which cross all these boundaries? No matter how they voted in 2016, people are hurting.

Wendell Berry, farmer, poet, novelist, has an essay in which he quotes his teacher, the writer Wallace Stegner. *He thought that we Americans are divided into two kinds of people: “boomers” and “stickers.” Boomers are those who pillage and run, who want to make a killing and end up on Easy Street, [and they may be rich or poor.] Stickers are those who settle, who love the life they have made and the place they have made it [even if it's pretty humble].* This was written many years ago, but I'm struck by what a timely assessment it is. *Boomer*, he goes on (Wendell Berry quoting Wallace Stegner), *names a kind of person and a kind of ambition that is the major theme, so far, of the history of the European races in our country. Sticker*

*names a kind of person and also a desire that is, so far, a minor theme of that history, but a theme persistent enough to remain significant and to offer, still, a significant hope. The Boomer is motivated by greed, the desire for money, property, and power. Stickers are motivated by affection, by love for a place and its story, its life, love of people in general and persons one by one, love of principle and love of possibility for all. Boomers run roughshod over landscapes, neighborhoods, communities, commitments, for no other purpose than self-aggrandizement and self-enrichment; stickers stick together, their land, their dreams, their struggles held in common, and interlaced with the interests of every living thing. Stickers live by discipline and by devotion; boomers by their opposite. These orientations transcend political labels. “Sticking” is connected to the ways of love.*

I’m trying to hold that deep wisdom as I think about the President’s remark on Thursday about Haiti and Africa and Norway, and why it’s not enough only to be exasperated about that, or witty and snarky and Twitterly about it – why this is so serious. Millions of people are upset, of course, but other millions cheer him on. What do we do with that? Are they all in the circle of “we,” those Boomers? IS our embrace that wide? It injured us all, that racist, ignorant speaking; it hurts us all, because it misrepresents us and disrespects us at the core of our dignity as a people, an American people. It scorns us and smears us, it ridicules the way we continue so faithfully, perhaps foolishly, to cherish the foundational principles of our nation’s character,

which we know were flawed from the beginning,

which we know were written by white and wealthy men, slaveholding, genocidal men,

but still those principles, and the vision underneath, speak inalienable truths about humanity, dignity, equality, compassion and freedom. The President demeans a sacred dream when he speaks as he did, when he tweets and is retweeted, diminishes the same dream about which Dr. King spoke, the same dream for which King and countless others whose names are known and whose names are not, gave and still give their lives, the same dream to which we as Americans, patriots, citizens of Earth, dedicate ourselves – this dream which is connected, at its best, to our own theology of justice, inclusion, equity, and love.

A 21<sup>st</sup> century Unitarian Universalist theology is going to worry less about what specifically each person believes – your most intimate spiritual experience and devotional expression. That will still be important, but it will no longer divide us and distract us. A twenty-first century Unitarian Universalism is going to worry less about what we each specifically believe, and more about what we believe *in*, what we stand for, and by whose side we’re standing, marching, mourning, singing, teaching, learning, living, *whose heartbeat is our heartbeat, whose song is our song*. Our faith calls us into communion now, by necessity and gladly, with communities of color, with immigrants, and with the poor (not just the struggling middle, but the millions at the very bottom)- not to rescue anyone, not to “save” anyone, but because our own salvation is bound up with everybody else’s and with the health of the planet, and because as I’ve said here before and truly believe, the future of our movement, the relevance of our little association, its viability and integrity, depends on our humility and our courage in de-centering ourselves from the interfaith conversation. That’s also about decentering whiteness, about learning to be one voice among many in a heart-breakingly gorgeous human choir.

In 1965, Martin Luther King was already concerned about a demeaned and disrespected dream, diminished not by any one person, no more then than now, but by a larger, more insidious system and the apathy and fear that allowed it to prevail. *The dream is shattered*, he said, *as I walk through the cities of our nation and see sometimes ten and fifteen people trying to live in one or two rooms. I've seen my dream shattered as I met hundreds of people who didn't earn more than six or seven hundred dollars. I've seen my dream shattered as I've seen young men and women with a sense of utter hopelessness because they can't find any jobs and they see life as a long and desolate corridor with no exit signs. And not only Negroes - I've seen my dream shattered because I've seen my white brothers living in poverty. And I'm concerned about white poverty as much as I'm concerned about Negro poverty. So yes, the dream has been shattered.* He said later, *we have moved from the era of civil rights to the era of human rights... there must be a radical redistribution of economic and political power... After Selma and the Voting Rights Bill, we moved into a new era, which must be an era of revolution...In short, we have moved into an era where we are called upon to raise certain basic questions about the whole society.*

He was already thinking not only about black dignity versus white power, but how for millions of poor people, black and white, the struggle was in fact be the same.

In December 1967, he announced a plan to bring together poor people from across the country for an occupation of Washington, D.C., demanding jobs, housing, equal education— for everyone. This was the Poor People's Campaign, the vision that brought him four months later to Memphis in support of sanitation workers striking there. Most of his speeches and sermons that year, his last year, were about poverty and the war in Vietnam, and the intersection of these with racism and with public theology. "There are millions of poor people in this country today who believe they have nothing to lose," he said. "If they can be helped to take action together, they will do so with a freedom and a power that will be a new and unsettling force in our complacent national life. Beginning in the new year we will be recruiting 3,000 of the poorest citizens from urban and rural areas to lead a massive direct action in the capitol, and they will stay there until the federal government takes serious and adequate action on jobs and income." And they did that. Although King was murdered in April, in June 50,000 people arrived by car, by train, by horse-drawn, to launch a unified, inter-racial coalition of poor people, 3,000 of whom occupied the national mall for six weeks, living in tents, bringing speakers, training activists and honing a legislative agenda. It was called Resurrection City.

Earlier that year King gave a sermon at Riverside Church in New York, one of his most radical, called "Beyond Vietnam." *A time comes when silence is betrayal*, he said. *The truth of these words is beyond doubt, but the mission to which they call us is a most difficult one. Even when pressed by the demands of inner truth, [we] do not easily assume the task of opposing [our] government's policy... Nor does the human spirit move without great difficulty against all the apathy of conformist thought within one's own bosom and in the surrounding world. When the issues at hand seem as perplexing as they often do ... we are always on the verge of being mesmerized by uncertainty. But we must move on. These are revolutionary times. All over the globe [people] are revolting against old systems of exploitation and oppression, and out of the wounds of a frail world, new systems of justice and equality are being born... If we are to get on to the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of*

*values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered... This call that lifts neighborly concern beyond tribe, race, class, and nation is in reality a call for an all-embracing and unconditional love for all [hu]mankind.*

Fast forward to 2018, exactly 50 years after Resurrection City. One observer says: “Fifty years from 1968, we have nearly 100 million poor and working poor people in this country, 14 million poor children. ... We have less voting rights protection than we had in 1965. Every state where there’s high voter suppression also has high poverty, denial of health care, denial of equal education, denial of living wages, denial of labor union rights, attacks on immigrants, attacks on women.” This is the Reverend Dr. William Barber, powerful preacher, radical strategist and author of the book, *The Third Reconstruction* about national efforts to build an interfaith, interracial, intersectional moral movement for our time, has stepped down after ten years as President of the North Carolina NAACP, in order to launch a new Poor People’s Campaign: a National Call for Moral Revival. It has “an audacious agenda:” “to challenge the evils of systemic racism, poverty, the war economy, ecological devastation and the nation’s distorted morality.” It is a fusion politics, he says: “We have black, we have white, we have brown, young, old, gay, straight, Jewish, Muslim, Christians, people of faith, people not of faith, who are coming together,” including traditionally conservative Christians and white evangelicals who understand poverty and degradation, whether economic, ecological or ethical, as sin. This spring, on the Monday after Mother’s Day, the Poor People’s Campaign will begin 40 days of coordinated action, with the goal of engaging 25,000 people in civil discourse and civil disobedience at the US capitol and state capitols around the country.

Their principles are clear:

- We are rooted in a moral analysis based on our deepest religious and constitutional values that demand justice for all. Moral revival is necessary to save the heart and soul of our democracy.
- We believe that people should not live in or die from poverty in the richest nation ever to exist.
- We recognize the centrality of systemic racism must be named, detailed and exposed empirically, morally and spiritually. Poverty and economic equality cannot be understood apart from a society built on white supremacy
- We are committed to lifting up the leadership of those most affected by systemic racism, poverty, and ecological devastation and to building unity across lines of division.
- We believe in the dismantling of an unjust criminalization system, that equal protection under the law is non-negotiable.
- We aim to shift the distorted moral narrative often promoted by religious extremists from personal issues like prayer in school, abortion, sexuality, gun rights, property rights to

systemic injustices like how our society treats the poor, women, children, workers, immigrants and the sick.

- We will organize at the state and local level—not only nationally. The movement is not from above but below
- We will do our work in a non-partisan way—This is not about left and right, Democrat or Republican but about right and wrong.
- The Campaign and all its Participants embrace nonviolence.

To me, the new Poor People's Campaign shows a way not to commemorate Martin Luther King, but to offer the work and the vision of the ancestors as a sacred gift to our descendants.

Whose heartbeat is your heartbeat?

Whose song is your song?

Many years ago Ross and I lived in New Haven, Connecticut, and several times a week I walked from the poor neighborhood (really poor neighborhood) where we lived across the city, through downtown to the Divinity School. It took about an hour. One morning, in the winter, crossing the New Haven Green, which is very large, there was a huddle of homeless men, two or three, standing by another man, crumpled on the ground. Just as I came close, a police car drove right into the park, and an ambulance with no lights. It was maybe 7 in the morning, just getting light. The EMT's knelt to examine the man - it didn't take long - and then they covered him, entirely, with a blanket (the very thing he'd lacked all night when he'd been not dead, but sleeping). They lifted the body into the ambulance and drove away, and one by one the other men, who had scattered, came quietly back. They came out of nowhere, out the invisible places in plain sight where homeless people go. One knelt on the ground. One took off his cap, even though it was snowing. One picked up an empty bottle near where the dead man had lain and put it in his own trash bag of redeemable bottles. One picked up the dead man's coat, folded like a pillow, and held it out to an older man, who shook his head and raised his hand in courteous deference, and the other man just put it on over his own thin jacket. I was late now, but it seemed right and fitting to wait till the service was over, because it felt like that, like a service. The man who died was white. (His name was Vladimir Kavilevsky, and we learned later that Ross knew him very well, from the shelter where he worked.) The man who died was white; the others were white and black, Puerto Rican, Jamaican. This doesn't matter, except that it does: they were all of us.

It takes discipline to see what's there to be seen; it takes discipline to look when you would rather look away. I'm telling you this story, but what I can't tell you is the number of times I have looked away, the number of times I've just kept walking, the number of times I have not stopped my commute or my life, not noticed, not cried in the snow, not allowed someone else's heartbeat, or their stopped heart, their condition, which is our shared condition, to be my heartbeat and my song, my religion and my nationality. I can't tell you how many hundreds, thousands of times I've not seen the poor, because I didn't see, didn't have time or didn't feel like seeing, didn't happen to choose that discipline, that sacrament, that day, because I was

booming on with my own tiny, agenda, not sticking by my heart. It may be that this one time stands out because it was exactly that- one time. When I finally walked away, I overheard one guy say to another one, or maybe to me, “Shouldn’t happen in America.”

What *should* happen in America?

The only reason I can think of to observe the King holiday tomorrow, and every year, is to ask that question anew. What should happen in America, and what should never happen? Are we boomers – pillagers - or stickers, stuck hopelessly on this old dream of radical love, this dream of transformation?

Whose heartbeat is your heartbeat?

Whose song is our song?

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The service ended with an opportunity to sign on to the New Poor People’s Campaign:  
[www.poorpeoplescampaign.org](http://www.poorpeoplescampaign.org)