November 9, 2019 **Remarks: Rise Up to Create a Livable Future Conference**

Death of Sixty Babies

"Once on the Blackshear place, they took all the fine looking boys and girls that was thirteen years old or older and put them in a big barn after they had stripped them naked. They used to strip them naked and put them in a big barn every Sunday and leave them there until Monday morning. Out of that came sixty babies."

"They was too many babies to leave in the quarters for some one to take care of during the day. When the young mothers went to work Blackshear had them take their babies with them to the field, and it was two or three miles from the house to the field. He didn't want them to lose time walking backward and forward nursing. They built a long old trough like a great long old cradle and put all these babies in it every morning when the mother come out to the field. It was set at the end of the rows under a big old cottonwood tree."

“When they were at the other end of the row, all at once a cloud no bigger than a small spot came up, and it grew fast, and it thundered and lightened as if the world were coming to an end, and the rain just came down in great sheets. And when it got so they could go to the other end of the field, that trough was filled with water and every baby in it was floating ’round in the water drownded. They never got nary a lick of labor and nary a red penny for ary one of them babies.”

My name is Michael McPhearson

That is a passage from Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in the United States From Interviews with Former Slaves, Volume II Arkansas Narratives, Part 3.

How many of you have read any slave narratives? You should read at least a few so that you can have a first-hand account of the dehumanization and evil this nation has condoned and allowed.

Thank you, Peace Action, Cole Harrison, Joseph Gerson, and Rosemary Kean for inviting me here today. Thank you for taking out the time to be here and getting up early enough to hear me speak! I will try not to disappoint you. I appreciate your dedication to peace and justice.

I need to take the time to congratulate the city of Boston on a historic election Tuesday, resulting in the most diverse city council in Boston’s history. That is amazing and a graphic illustration of positive change.

A task of being the first speaker is to frame what we will talk about today.

The name of our conference is Rising Up for a Livable Future: Against Endless War, Climate Emergency, and Injustice.

That’s a lot. Right? Almost every issue imaginable could fit under this title.

So, while thinking about what to say, I turned to lawyer, activist, and theorist Kimberle Crenshaw. She is an African American woman who developed the term intersectionality as what she said is not a grand theory but a metaphor or prism for understanding certain kinds of problems.

In a 2018 interview, she pointed out that Black girls are six times more likely to be suspended from school than White girls. She stated that the issue is probably a race and gender problem, not just one or the other.

So, for example, in this country, if you are an immigrant, woman, poor, Muslim, a person of color, and queer, you face six structures of oppression. The possibilities of the impact of these structures on this person's life are very different than what I may face as a Black person devoid of most other options for stereotypes other than my Blackness.

By that, I mean, intersectionality also helps me recognize my privilege. I am a male, born in the U.S., a college graduate, and a Christian.

Professor Crenshaw developed a way to think about and see the convergence of issues and their impact on individuals.

I asked myself how I can illustrate the intersectionality of our issues and the impact of that convergence on our work in my effort to explain the essential need for what I call a full spectrum movement?

I came up with a few ideas. That’s the main reason I read the slave narrative and will return to that in a moment.

While I was writing, thinking, and researching, I came across a tweet from Krystal Two B, a U.S. Army veteran and a Coordinator for About Face: Veteran’s Against War Drop the MIC (Military Industrial Complex) Campaign.

Her tweet informed me that on October 31st, the White House issued a Presidential Proclamation stating that November is National American History and Founders Month.

Krystal wrote, “Pretty sure it was already Native American Heritage Month.

“Yo! Part of the colonial process was to ignore, silence, and erase the real history of this land and its Original Peoples. Here's, yet another way the white supremacy this country was founded on, continues to erase us!

It occurred to me that current events are the best illustration of how our struggles are intertwined.

To be clear, - this is not all about that guy in the White House. We have always faced most, if not all, of the present issues except for perhaps the climate emergency. From the beginning of this nation and before, there have been at least two historical tendencies.

One is the expansion of America's promise of freedom. The other is exclusion, restriction, and control of who is and is not free. One I believe is driven by the human spirit's desire, perhaps a demand to live in what MLK called the Beloved Community as the person you are. We all want to be who we are. I know I want to live in a community where I can be me.

Greed, self-centeredness, fear, and profound alienation drives the other.

So, none of this is new. The same forces that promoted slavery in the past work to suppress voting in the Black community today. They are the same forces that seek to end access to abortions.

They are the same forces that support Trump’s harsh immigration policies and oppose same-sex marriage.

They are the same forces that built crowded and dangerous tenement housing in the past and today block reforms to build affordable housing and end the unsheltered crisis.

They are the same forces that demand federal budget cuts to programs that support people while calling for more military spending.

And at the core of the ideology then and now is a triad: White, Patriarchal Christian superiority.

But what I think is unique to the Trump Administration is the ferocity and full-spectrum nature of the attacks on human rights and the planet.

As for Trump himself, we have not seen in my lifetime a president who is openly racist, misogynist, and Islamophobic. And, he surrounds himself with zealous officials who mirror his bigotry.

The attacks illustrate the need for a full spectrum movement or what the Poor Peoples Campaign calls a Fusion Movement. We are under attack on all fronts in an unprecedented way. What sense does it make to confront the attacks piecemeal? It is the same monster with several tentacles. We must change the nature of the beast.

Let me return to slavery to emphasize my point further.

When you hear the story of the murder of those sixty helpless babies, if you only think about slavery and the oppression of Black people, you are falling into the trap that divides us and holds us back from success. As movement builders, peacemakers, and justice seekers, we must see more. You must see yourself in the story.

A society that supports those kinds of systemic horrors must also condone and support a spectrum of oppression.

Let’s start with the land. After Eli Whitney’s cotton gin made cotton much more profitable, more land was needed to grow it. The U.S. government forced Indigenous Americans to relocate to take the land to give to White farmers. This "new" land needed new slaves to work it.

Whitney invented his version of a cotton gin in 1793. Other, less efficient designs existed.

In 1790, about 700,000 enslaved workers lived in the U.S. By 1850, that number, driven primarily by cotton, rose to three million.

The same values and economic forces that led to the ethnic cleansing of native people from their land and genocidal policies against them increased incentives for more slavery.

Now in the barn, girls and women were raped.

People across the gender spectrum who had no choices about how to express their sexuality were in that barn.

The babies died because mothers were forbidden to take the time to nurse their children properly. They did not have the freedom to check on them and protect them while they worked. That sounds like modern-day labor rights. Slavery itself undercut the poor White workers’ wages.

The NYTimes created The 1619 Project to commemorate the year at least 20 Africans were sold to Jamestown settlers 400 years ago. They published a series of podcasts as part of the effort. A quote near the end of Episode 2 explains for us in a few sentences the broader impact of slavery.

*“So, this is a story about American capitalism, about foundations of American capitalism, about the American economy. And it was an economy that got started in brutality.”*

*“Slavery allowed this poor fledgling nation to turn into a colossal powerhouse in the global economy. But what slavery also created was a culture in American capitalism that was incredibly brutal. “*

In other words, to use military jargon, slavery set a command climate.

A command climate is a collection of attitudes and perceptions of people in the organization.

Slavery set a command climate of brutality and dehumanization, not only for Black people but anyone who could be used by the system or stood in the way of its workings.

That climate is still with us today.

Some of you may say, Michael, you’ve talked mostly about domestic issues. How does this relate to war?

Taking land from indigenous people and stealing people from Africa to enslave were foreign policy decisions. Those decisions set the stage and rational to use violence and brutality as the indispensable nation to impose our worldview and exploit global resources. Racism then and today is the primary way to create the monstrous other who is beyond redemption and understanding. They must be killed or tamed.

However, don’t forget, I said there are at least two tendencies. Our tendency, our resistance, and the struggle for peace and justice have an intersectional history as well.

A lot has changed since August 1619. It is a change that passes through that horrible day when those 60 babies died. Change that made space for me to be here today. It is the change that led to Boston’s multicolor city council and Rep Ayanna Pressley’s election to Congress. It is a path that is much wider than the end of slavery and Jim Crow.

Again, returning to the Sixty Babies and slavery.

As you know, there were people known as abolitionists who opposed this horrible institution. But men dominated the movement.

Women were expected to stay out of politics and not speak as orators.

In 1840, abolitionists Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Caddy Stanton attempted to participate in the first World Anti-Slavery Convention in London.

Mott and Stanton met there for the first time.

In summary, their efforts failed.

Sectioned off with other women, they were not allowed to speak. They could only watch the discussion about their participation.

However, their failure was the start of something new. It opened the eyes of Mott and Stanton to the extent of their oppression. It led them to organize the historic 1848 Seneca Falls Women’s Right Convention and the Declaration of Sentiments demanding equal rights for women.

Social reformer, abolitionist, orator, and formerly enslaved Fredrick Douglass was one of about 40 men in over 300 attendees.

Mott and Stanton did not stop their abolitionist work to fight for their rights as women.

Douglass advocated for women’s rights and the end of slavery.

These activists understood the intersection of their issues. It is clear to me that for one movement to find success, they both had to happen at the same time.

If we look at the history of individual movements for rights in this nation and around the world, we will see that it is an intersectional history of the struggle for human recognition and dignity.

A microcosm of these struggles is the movements of the sixties.

Those movements began at least in the late '40s with returning Black soldiers from WWII who would no longer bow to the humiliations of Jim Crow.

Their resistance sparked a mood change in my community that led to new self-recognition of our humanity and the ability to impact our circumstances.

Black people standing up to the triad of White, Male, Christian supremacy unleashed demands from everyone under its thumb.

The ripples continue today, perhaps most profoundly seen in the Transgender movement.

These movements took place on their timetable without a grand scheme. But they would not have happened without each other.

Could the Civil Rights movement have continued momentum if the system was not also confronted by The Free Speech, Peace, and Women's movements?

Would not the backlash we see today against freedoms gained in the sixties be stronger, happened earlier, and be much more successful if our rights were not entangled?

In the long term, we need each other for any one of our movements to be successful. We need a full spectrum movement to take on the whole monster, or our individual efforts will fail or at best be limited.

In the last part, I will briefly give a few thoughts on how to build a full spectrum movement.

1. To the peace activist, we must not expect activists of communities who face unprecedented threats to their very existence to join us; we must join together.

Muslims, immigrants, all people of color - and the traditional people to hate; Black people; and the traditional people to rob of their land; indigenous people - we - I say we as a person of those communities - cannot afford to have our activists, our freedom fighters, and justice seekers focus solely on issues that do not immediately impact us. We must defend ourselves and our people.

And yet we need each other to win a future that is good and just for all of us.

1. Some of us think our priority issue is the most important, and everything else is a distraction or should be subsumed by the overriding concern.

Ignore those people.

I do not mean that we should not love them, and we should not work with them, but we can no longer follow them. They cannot be our role models.

That mentality is a detriment to building a broad movement and holds us back. Further, that thinking does not provide a model for change other than everyone else must join them. That is foolishness. It has never happened, and it never will.

1. Uniting does not mean melding. Movements will continue to progress at their own pace. But we must organize with other movements in mind and find opportunities to work together.
2. But most importantly, we must bridge the divides the system has created between us. We must work hard to deconstruct and not replicate the societal structures of oppression in our organizations and personal relations.

To men of all colors and White people: Accept that because we are socialized in a xenophobic, racists and sexist society, you will sometime do racists and sexists things. Do not become defensive when called in about it. Work on your White and male fragility. Recognize your privilege.

I know it is hard. I am dealing with my own. But we must be open to learning so that we can heal together.

1. Lastly, we must understand that our challenge is not to outthink, outmaneuver, or defeat the warmongers, death dealers, and those who would impoverish us and the planet to satisfy their greed.

Our challenge is to embrace the collective narrative of our struggles. We must feel in our bones that our futures are bound up with each other. We must unite, for in that unity, the forces of hate and injustice face defeat. They know this, they fear this and continuously work to keep us apart. And will kill to do so. Examples are the assassination of MLK and the murder of Fred Hampton.

I know that sometimes the future looks bleak, but look around us. Look at your life and with whom you associate within the struggle. Take heart and be joyful! We are a broad spectrum of genders, colors, views, and creeds. We are smarter, we have more numbers, and we have a more deep-rooted history than ever before. We have the means. We

can win.

I close by saying I came to the peace movement, not through an anti-war lens. I joined in significant part because I saw that peace is the answer to all our struggles.

I understand that movements like the Poor People's Campaign and organizing in a Peace at Home Peace Abroad framework are the path to unity. Hate and injustice are like viruses that infect everything in its way.

We must contain it to stop it to save everyone. Let us stop hate and injustice together as we build a Livable Future.

Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere is not merely a quote. It is a truth upon which we must act.