

William Rivers Pitt | Beyond Parkland: A Risen Generation Is Challenging the Nation

bit.ly/truthout_parkland

Reprinted with permission: Truthout.org

By William Rivers Pitt, Truthout | Op-Ed

*Some walked and walked and walked –
they walked the earth,
they walked the waters,
they walked the air.*

*Why do you stand? they were asked, and
Why do you walk?*

*Because of the children, they said, and
because of the heart, and
because of the bread.*

*Because the cause is
the heart's beat, and
the children born, and
the risen bread.*

— Daniel Berrigan, excerpt from poem “Some”

I have never been more frightened in my life. I have never been more hopeful in my life. The former I owe to the times. The latter I owe to the student activists who marched on 3/24, and to all the survivors of shooting after shooting who joined them, their memories crowded with the dead as they roared. Only an age so thoroughly repugnant could galvanize a response so perfectly righteous.

What happened last weekend -- in Washington DC, in cities around the country and the world, and in my own tiny town square surrounded by neighbors with my daughter's little hand in mine— changed me forever. I have never seen the like, nor has anyone else living. The March For Our Lives was the grandchild of the civil rights movement, the child of every Vietnam and Iraq War protest, sister and brother to every march and every raised fist that came before, and it stood proudly with them all. It did not strut or preen. It owned.

The paving stones in Washington, DC are still whispering to each other: What was that? Days later, I'm not sure everyone fully comprehends what took place on Saturday. I'm not sure I do, not yet.

My daughter picked a sign and held it up for me to see, a wide smile peeking from behind windblown hair. It read, “AM I NEXT?”

It is about gun violence in schools, of course, and the wide availability of war weapons within our society. I attended the local 3/24 protest with my daughter, who is of an age with the Sandy Hook victims when they were cut down. Volunteers had set up a table filled with pre-made signs people were free to take. My daughter picked a sign and held it up for me to see, a wide smile peeking from behind



Naomi Wadler, 11, of Alexandria, Virginia, is hugged by Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School student Jaclyn Corin near the conclusion of March For Our Lives on Saturday, March 24, 2018, in Washington, DC. (Photo: Matt McClain / The Washington Post via Getty Images)

windblown hair. It read, “AM I NEXT?” in jet black ink. Part of my heart died on the spot, and it was just a sign. She's still here. So many children aren't.

School shootings and war weapons: These two despicable phenomena are what brought us to this mighty crossroads. There is so much more, though, and speaker after speaker at the march in Washington hammered that point home until the windows rattled. The long-ignored calamity of gun violence in communities of color—including the violence of policing—was the centerpiece of the most striking commentaries of the day. Tall among them was the thunder laid down by 11-year-old *Naomi Wadler*:

I am here today to represent Courtlin Arrington. I am here today to represent Hadiya Pendleton. I am here today to represent Taiyana Thompson, who, at just 16, was shot dead in her home here in Washington, DC. I am here today to acknowledge and represent the African American girls whose stories don't make the front page of every national newspaper, whose stories don't lead on the evening news. I represent the African American women who are victims of gun violence, who are simply statistics instead of vibrant, beautiful girls full of potential.

So I am here today to honor the words of Toni Morrison: “If there is a book that you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, you must be the one to write it.” I urge everyone here and everyone who hears my voice to join me in telling the stories that aren't told, to honor the girls, the women of color who are murdered at disproportionate rates in this nation. I urge each of you to help me write the narrative for this world and understand, so that these girls and women are never forgotten. Thank you.

I would follow Naomi Wadler into fire. Her presence was incredibly powerful, and she demanded far more from us than thoughts and prayers. She wants genuine systemic change, she wants it now,

and the responding roar of the assemblage rang out as witness and warning.

Reinforcing the challenge laid down by Wadler was 17-year-old youth leader and activist *Edna Lizbeth Chávez*. Her sorrow was fathomless, her demands straightforward:

Policymakers, listen up. Arming teachers will not work! More security in our schools does not work! Zero-tolerance policies do not work! They make us feel like criminals. We should feel empowered and supported in our schools. Instead of funding these policies, fund mentorship programs, mental health resources, paid internship and job opportunities. My brother, like many others, would have benefitted from this. So let's make it happen. It's important to work with people that are impacted by these issues—the people you represent.

We need to focus on changing the conditions that foster violence and trauma. And that's how we will transform our communities and uplift our voices. This has not, and shall not, stop us. It has only empowered us. *Mi nombre*, my name, is Edna Lizbeth Chavez. Remember my name. Remember these faces. Remember us and how we're making a change. *La lucha sigue*.

Parkland survivor *Emma González* read the names of the students who died in her school before stopping the world with six eternal minutes of silence to honor them, her furious tears incandescent on her cheeks as she stood, and stood, and stood. “Six minutes and about 20 seconds,” she said. “In a little over six minutes, 17 of our friends were taken from us.” Journalist David Corn called it the “loudest silence in the history of US social protest.”



Emma Gonzalez speaks at the “March for Our Lives” rally in support of gun control in Washington, DC, March 24, 2018. Photo: Alex Brandon/AP. Image source: bit.ly/emma_gonz

In an editorial published the Monday after the march, González wrote, “We Stoneman Douglas students may have woken up only recently from our sheltered lives to fight this fight, but we stand in solidarity with those who have struggled before us, and we will fight alongside them moving forward to enact change and make life survivable for all young people. People who have been fighting for this for too long, others who were never comfortable enough to openly talk about their experiences with gun violence, or still others who were never listened to when opening up about their experiences with gun violence or were afraid to speak out—these are the people we are fighting with and for.”

Here is a generation of young people reaching out to each other, and to us all, from the funeral shroud.

Donald Trump's name was barely mentioned on Saturday, a fact that must have painfully dented his eggshell ego, but all he represents was cast down and denounced just the same. Thanks to Mr. Trump and those who serve him, fascism and overt racism have become fashionable again. What took place in Washington this weekend was, among other things, a giant middle finger aimed directly at the white nationalism of the age. Here is a generation of young people reaching out to each other, and to us all, from the funeral shroud.

This largest generation in US history is coming into its voting rights day by passing day, a fact that should strike mortal fear into the hearts of those who enjoy things as they are. Bought-off fools with muddy wits are trying to shout down these new activists, to little effect, and those with a financial stake in the violent status quo are leaving visible puddles of desperation in their wake. For the first time in a very long time, the country is stoutly on the side of the protesters, and the protesters have no intention of letting the grass grow under their feet.

Every time a school carries out an “Active Shooter Drill,” another activist is born.

Beyond all that is one unbending truth: Every time a school carries out an “Active Shooter Drill,” another activist is born. Tomorrow and tomorrow creeps, someone once said. Time always wins.

I have been attending protest rallies with grim regularity for a long time now. My experience of 3/24 was not nearly as dynamic as what was experienced in the capital or in the other larger protests around the country—just a few hundred people standing together in unity at the rag end of a long New England winter... but one of them was my daughter, clapping and cheering and shouting, “Everyone should be safe!” She was part of something big, she knew it, and she was proud. When she saw the footage of the larger marches on the news that night, she turned to me and said, “That was us, Daddy!” It sure was, I told her. “Let's do it again!” Count on it, kid.

We stand before the confluence of history. Generations of violence, racism, greed and indifference have conspired to make diamonds forged by the crushing weight of failure and fear. These student activists are now in the headlines because of gun violence in schools and the availability of war weapons, but they seek much more. In their whole lives, many have never known one minute of peace. They are determined that this will change. They are hard, they are strong, they are the ones they've been waiting for, and like springtime, they are finally here.

La lucha sigue. The struggle continues.

Copyright, Truthout. May not be reprinted without permission.

Bio: William Rivers Pitt who lives and works in New Hampshire is a senior editor and lead columnist at Truthout. He is also a New York Times and internationally bestselling author of 3 books: *War on Iraq: What Team Bush Doesn't Want You to Know*, *The Greatest Sedition Is Silence* and *House of Ill Repute: Reflections on War, Lies, and America's Ravaged Reputation*. His 4th book, *The Mass Destruction of Iraq: Why It Is Happening, and Who Is Responsible* written with Dahr Jamail is available on Amazon.