

Get in the Way

John Lewis

*Transcribed by **Steven E. Knepper***

Thank you very much, Mr. President, members of the staff, members of the faculty, and members of the student body of this great and historic college. Let me say that I am very delighted, very happy, and very pleased to be here tonight. Thank you for honoring me.

I want to start off tonight by saying that I feel more than lucky, but very blessed to be here. I did not grow up in a very big city, in a big city like Huntingdon or Harrisburg or Pittsburgh or Washington DC or Atlanta or Chicago. I grew up on a farm fifty miles from Montgomery near a little place called Troy in southeast Alabama. It is true that my father was a sharecropper on a tenant farm. But back in 1944 when I was four years old (and I do remember when I was four) my father had saved 300 dollars. And with that 300 dollars he bought 110 acres of land. And on this land there was a lot of cotton, corn, and peanuts – hogs, cows, and chickens.

As students, if you come to Washington and visit my congressional office or happen to be in downtown Atlanta and

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visit my office, the moment you walk through the door, the first thing my staff would offer you would be a Coca-Cola. Because Atlanta is the home of the Coca-Cola Bottling Company, and Coca-Cola provides all members of the Georgia congressional delegation with a supply of Coca-Cola products. Every now and then, I may have a diet Coke.

The next thing the staff will offer you would be some peanuts. In the state of Georgia, we raise a lot of peanuts, like we did in Alabama. And the Georgia Peanut Commission provides us with peanuts. I don't eat too many of those peanuts. I ate so many peanuts when I was growing up in rural Alabama in the forties and fifties that I just don't want to see any more peanuts. Years ago I would get on a flight and fly from Atlanta to Washington, or from Washington back to Atlanta, and the flight attendant would try to push some peanuts on me. No thanks. I don't care for any more peanuts.

Now students, you are too young to remember, but maybe your mothers, or your fathers, your grandparents or your great-grandparents will recall, that they used to get the Sears Roebuck catalog. It was a big, thick book. Some people called it the ordering book. Some people called it the wish book; I wish I had this, or I wish I had that. So I just kept on wishing and hoping on that little farm outside Troy, Alabama.

When I was a young child, about seven-and-a-half or eight-years-old, I wanted to be a minister. So one of my uncles asked Santa Claus to bring me a Bible. I learned to read that Bible, and then from time to time, with the help of my brother and my sisters and my first-cousins, we would hold church. We'd gather all of our chickens together in the chicken yard and in the chicken house, just like you're gathered here in this hall tonight. And the chickens, along with my brothers and sisters and first cousins, would make up my congregation, and I would preach.

As I look back, some of these chickens would bow their heads; some of these chickens would shake their heads. They never quite said "Amen!" But I am convinced that some of these chickens that I preached to in the forties and in the fifties tended to listen to me much better than some of my colleagues listen to me in Congress today. As a matter of fact, they were a little more productive. At least these chickens produced eggs!

When I was growing up there outside of Troy, Alabama, and we would visit Birmingham, visit Montgomery, I saw those signs that said: “White men,” “Colored men,” “White women,” “Colored women.” I saw those signs that said: “White waiting,” “Colored waiting.” As a young child, I tasted the bitter fruits of segregation and racial discrimination. And I didn’t like it.

I used to ask my mother and my father, all my sisters and brothers, my grandparents and great-grandparents, “Why segregation? Why racial discrimination?” And they would say, “That’s the way it is. Don’t get in trouble. Don’t get in the way.”

But as a young child, when I was 15 years old in the tenth grade in 1955, I heard of a little cause. I heard the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., on an old radio. He was talking about Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the words and the teachings of Martin Luther King, Jr. inspired me to find a way to get in the way.

In 1956, at the age of 16, I took some of my brothers and sisters and first cousins down to the public library in the little town of Troy, Alabama. We were trying to get library cards, trying to check some books out. That day we were told by the librarian that the library was for whites only and not for coloreds. But on July the 5th, 1958, I went back to the public library in Troy, Alabama, for a book signing for my book *Walking with the Wind*. And hundreds of black and white citizens showed up, and they finally gave me a library card. I think that story says something about the distance we’ve come and the progress we’ve made in laying down the burden of race in America.

When I finished high school in May of 1957, at the age of 17, I wanted to attend Troy State College, now known as Troy State University. It was only ten miles away from my home. I submitted my application and my high school transcript, but I never heard a word from the school. So I wrote a letter to Martin Luther King, Jr.; I told Dr. King that I wanted to try to desegregate Troy State. But I didn’t tell my mother, didn’t tell my father, or any of my sisters or brothers, any of my teachers. I just wrote a letter to Dr. King on my own, and Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote me back. He sent me a round-trip Greyhound Bus ticket and invited me to come to Montgomery to visit him.

In the meantime, I had been accepted to a little college in

Nashville, Tennessee. And I will never forget it, in the fall of 1957 – September 1957 – an uncle of mine gave me a hundred dollar bill – more money than I had ever had. He gave me a foot locker to put my books and my clothes in. And everything I had ever owned fit in that one foot locker. I went off to school.

While I was there, about two weeks later, I told one of my teachers that I had been in contact with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and this teacher was a friend of Dr. King. Both of them had graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta, and he informed Dr. King that I was in Nashville. Martin Luther King, Jr. got back in touch with me and suggested that when I came home for spring break, I should come to see him. One Saturday morning in the spring of 1958, by this time I am 18 years old, my father drove me to the Greyhound Bus Station. I boarded the bus, and traveled fifty miles from Troy to Montgomery.

I was met at the Greyhound Bus Station in downtown Montgomery by a young lawyer. I had never seen a lawyer before, black or white. A young man by the name of Fred Gray met me at the bus station. He was the lawyer for Rosa Parks, for Dr. King, and for the Movement. He picked me up and drove me to the First Baptist Church, presided over by the Reverend Ralph Abernathy, a colleague of Martin Luther King, Jr., and he ushered me in to the pastor's study. I saw Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy there standing behind a desk. I was so frightened. I didn't know what I was going to say.

As I moved toward Dr. King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy, Dr. King said, "Are you the boy from Troy? Are you John Lewis?"

And I spoke up and said, "Dr. King, I am John Robert Lewis."

I said my whole name. I guess I didn't want there to be any mistake that I was the right person. And that was the beginning of my relationship, my involvement with Martin Luther King, Jr. As a student, I continued to stay in Nashville. While studying there, I came in contact with a young man by the name of James Lawson. He was working for the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He later became a student at Vanderbilt University Divinity School, and he started teaching workshops on nonviolence. Many of us students at American Baptist Theological Seminary, at Fisk University, Tennessee State, Vanderbilt, Peabody College, and Meharry Medical School started attending these nonviolence workshops.

We studied what Gandhi was all about, what he attempted to do in South Africa, and what he accomplished in India. We studied our role in civil disobedience. We studied what Martin Luther King, Jr. was doing in Montgomery and in the state of Alabama. We studied passive resistance.

And then we started having what we called role-playing and social drama sessions. We had test sit-ins with black and white college students, and we went to downtown Nashville. In the fall of 1959, we began sitting-in at lunch counters in restaurants. We'd be sitting-in in a quiet, peaceful, nonviolent fashion waiting to be served. But in downtown Nashville, blacks and whites could not be served together at a lunch counter in a restaurant.

After the sit-in struggle in Nashville, we went to North Carolina on February 1, 1960. We started sitting-in there regularly. We would be sitting, waiting to be served. And a woman might walk up and put a lighted cigarette out in your hair. A guy in the back might spit on you. Some people might pull you off the lunch counter stool. Beat you. But we didn't strike back, because many of us during those earlier years rooted ourselves in nonviolence not simply as a technique or as a tactic, but as a way of life, as a way of living. Many of us came to the conclusion that means and ends are inseparable. If you want to create what Dr. King and many of the others called the Beloved Community, a good society, a community at peace with itself – if that is the goal, if that is the end – then the way must be one of love, one of peace, one of nonviolence.

During those years, many of us got in the way. We got in trouble. But it was good trouble. It was necessary trouble. We were trying to redeem the soul of America, not just to make the city of Nashville an open city, not just to create a loving community, a community at peace with itself. But we were trying to redeem the soul of America. So when we were beaten, when we were jailed, we didn't hold ill-feeling toward the people who beat us or jailed us.

I remember getting arrested for the very first time on February 27, 1960. A man came into the restaurant where we were sitting-in and took us to jail. I felt so free. I felt liberated. I knew that they would beat us, they would spit on us, they might even throw us in jail. But in the process, we were not only going to desegregate the lunch counters and restaurants in Nashville, or change the Deep South, but we would change America, and we have changed the

world. Because of the Civil Rights Movement, we witnessed what I like to call a nonviolent revolution in America, a revolution of values, a revolution of ideas.

The sit-ins, the freedom rallies, the demonstrations in Birmingham and other parts of the South, the March on Washington in the summer of 1963, all of these actions led to the passing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. I remember speaking at the March on Washington. Then I was 23 years old. I was a few pounds lighter, with all of my hair. A few days earlier, while I was working on my speech for the March on Washington, I was reading a copy of the *New York Times*, and I saw a group of black women in Southern Africa carrying signs saying “One Man, One Vote.” So in my speech at the March on Washington, I said something like: “One Man, One Vote. It is Africa’s cry. It is ours, too. It must be ours!” And that became a rally of pride for the students and for the young people in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) better known as “Snick.”

Just think! Back in '61, in '62, in the summer of '63, it was almost impossible for people of color to be able to register to vote in many of the political subdivisions in the South and in the 11 states of the old Confederacy from Virginia to Texas. In 1963, in 1964, in 1965, the state of Mississippi had a black voting age population of more than 450,000, but only about 16,000 blacks were registered to vote. There was one county in Alabama, Lowndes County, between Selma and Montgomery. The county was more than eight percent African-American, and there was not a single registered African-American voter.

People had to pass a so-called literacy test to register to vote, and on one occasion, there was a black man who held a Ph.D. degree who flunked the so-called literacy test. He was told he could not read or write well enough. On another occasion, a man was asked to give the number of bubbles in a bar of soap. So we had to organize and mobilize for the right to vote.

My organization, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, along with several other groups, organized something called the Mississippi Summer, forty years ago this past summer. We recruited more than 800 students, teachers, lawyers, doctors, ministers, priests, rabbis, and nuns to come to Mississippi to work in Freedom Schools, to prepare people to

pass the so-called literacy test.

One summer night – June 21, 1964 – three young men that I knew – Andy Goodman, Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney – went out to investigate the burning of a black church. These three young men were riding in a car, and they were stopped, arrested, and taken to the jail by the sheriff. Later that night, these three young men were taken from jail by the sheriff and his deputy and turned over to the Klan where they were beaten, shot, and killed.

These three young men didn't die in Vietnam. They didn't die in the Middle East. They didn't die in Eastern Europe. They didn't die in Africa, or Central or South America. They died right here in their own country, trying to get all our citizens to become participants in the democratic process. And sometimes throughout this year, or during the past four years, you may have heard over and over again that we should forget about what happened in Florida and get over it. But you should never forget about it, especially during this election year, because people died right here in America for the precious right to vote.

Let me say that was a dark hour for the Movement, but we didn't give up. We didn't give in. We didn't become hostile or bitter. We kept the faith. We kept our eyes on the prize. Six weeks later, the bodies of these three young men were discovered buried in a mound of dirt in Mississippi. On July 2, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He won a landslide election in November 1964. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. received the Nobel Peace Prize in December 1964. He came back from Europe, and held a meeting with President Johnson at the White House. He told the President in so many words that we needed a Voting Rights Act to secure the right to vote. And Lyndon Johnson said: "Dr. King, we don't have enough votes in Congress to pass a Voting Rights Act. I just signed the Civil Rights Act."

Martin Luther King, Jr. went back to Atlanta, met with a group of us, and said we will write that act. And he made a decision to join us in Alabama. In the fall of 1964, in the spring of 1965, only 2.1% of blacks of voting age were registered to vote in Selma, Alabama, the county seat of Dallas County. And the only place that you could even attempt to register to vote in Selma was at the courthouse. It didn't matter whether you lived forty miles away or ten miles away, you had to come to the courthouse.

You could only attempt to register on the first and third Mondays of each month. You had to pass a so-called literacy test. You would come down to the courthouse, go up some marble steps, go through the double doors, and get a copy of the literacy test – and try to pass it. But to do that you had to make it through a sheriff – you had to pass by him. He was a very big man. He wore a gun on one side and a billy club on the other side, and he carried an electric cattle prod in his hand. And he didn't use it on cows. His name was Jim Clark.

It was my day to lead a group of elderly black men and women to the courthouse, the exact date was January 18, 1965. They'd been standing in an unmoveable line almost all day, waiting to get a copy of the literacy test. Sheriff Clark met me at the top of the steps and said, "John Lewis, you're an outside agitator. You are the lowest form of all humanity."

I looked Sheriff Clark straight in the eye, and I said, "Sheriff, I might be an agitator, but I'm not an outsider. I grew up only ninety miles from here, and we are going to stay here until these people are allowed to register to vote."

He said, "You're under arrest." He arrested me along with the other people and took us to jail.

A few days later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Rev. Abernathy, and other religious leaders came to Selma and marched to the courthouse. Three hundred people were arrested, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., college students, high school students, housewives, farmers, teachers, lawyers, and doctors. We filled the city jail, the county jail. And then, about two weeks later, in a little town in Perry County, Alabama (Perry County is in the heart of the black belt of Alabama. It is the hometown of Mrs. Martin Luther King, Jr., Mrs. Ralph Abernathy, and the late Mrs. Andrew Young – Jean Young), a confrontation occurred, and while a young man by the name of Jimmy Lee Jackson tried to protect his elderly grandmother, he was shot in the stomach by a state trooper. And a few days later he died at the First American Hospital in Selma. And because of what happened to him, the Movement made a decision. We made a decision that we would march from Selma to Montgomery to dramatize to the nation that people of color wanted to register to vote – to become participants in the democratic process.

On Sunday, March 7, after church, we gathered outside of the

Brown Chapel AME Church in Selma and conducted a nonviolent workshop. At the end, we lined up in two's to walk from Selma to Montgomery. I was asked to lead the march with a young man by the name of Hosea Williams, from Dr. King's organization. Walking through the streets of Selma, no one said a word. It was mostly elderly men and women, and a few young people. We came to the edge of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, which crosses the Alabama River, and down below we saw all this water.

Hosea Williams said to me, "John, can you swim?"

And I said, "No."

I said, "Hosea, can you swim?"

And he said, "No."

And I said, "Well, there's too much water down there. We're not going to jump. We're not going back. We're going forward."

And we continued to march. When we came to the highest point on this bridge, the Edmund Pettus Bridge, crossing the Alabama River, in front of us we saw a sea of blue – Alabama State Troopers. We continued to march.

We came within inches of the state troopers, and a man identified himself and said, "I'm Major John Cloud of the Alabama State Troopers. This is an unlawful march; it will not be allowed to continue. I give you three minutes to disperse and return to your church."

In less than a minute and a half later, Major John Cloud said, "Troopers advance!" And we saw men putting on their gas masks. They came toward us, beating us with night sticks and bull whips. They released tear gas. I was hit on the head by a state trooper with a night stick. I suffered a concussion on that bridge. I thought I saw death; I thought I was going to die.

Thirty-nine years later I still don't recall how I made it across that bridge and back through the streets of Selma, back to that little church. But I do recall being at that church that Sunday afternoon. The church was full to capacity. More than 2,000 people on the inside, and people on the outside trying to get inside. Someone asked me to say something to the audience.

I stood up and said, "I don't understand it! How is it that President Johnson can send troops to Vietnam, and he cannot send troops to Selma, Alabama, to protect people who want to register to vote."

The next thing I knew, I'd been admitted to the First American Hospital in Selma. Seventeen of us were hospitalized. Because of what happened in Selma, there was a sense of righteous indignation all over America. There were demonstrations on almost every major college campus, at the White House, at the Department of Justice, and in front of American institutions abroad.

Early that Monday morning, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy came by to visit me in my hospital room.

And Dr. King said, "John, don't worry. We'll make it from Selma to Montgomery. The Voting Rights Act will be passed."

He told me there that he had issued a call for religious leaders to come to Selma. And more than a thousand ministers, priests, rabbis, nuns, teachers, lawyers, and doctors and others came to Selma on March 21st to march across the bridge past the point where we had been beaten two weeks earlier. A call had gone out from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in *Ebony* magazine for young people and students and others to come to Montgomery. And young people left this campus. Professors left this campus and came to Montgomery because of what had happened in Selma.

President Johnson spoke to the nation, addressing a joint session of Congress, and made one of the most meaningful speeches any president has made in modern times on the whole question of voting rights, on the question of civil rights. He spoke on March 15, 1965.

He started his speech off by saying: "I speak for the dignity of the man and for the destiny of democracy." President Johnson went on to say: "At times history and fate meet at a single time and a single place in man's unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and at Concord. So it was at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama."

He condemned the violence in Selma and introduced the Voting Rights Act. Before he concluded that speech, he said over and over again, "And we shall overcome." For the first time, the President of the United States of America used the words of the theme song of the Movement: "And we shall overcome."

I was sitting next to Martin Luther King, Jr. in the home of a local family in Selma, and we watched and listened to President Johnson. And tears came down Dr. King's face, and we all cried a

little. We'd heard the President say, "And we shall overcome."

On March 21, 1965, we set out from Selma to Montgomery. When we left the church, there were about 10,000 of us altogether walking toward Montgomery for the next four days. Only 300 of us walked all the way, but when we arrived in Montgomery, a few days later, there were more than 25,000 Americans. Black and white. Young and old. Congress debated the Voting Rights Act, passed it, and President Johnson signed it into law on August 6, 1965.

So today when you go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, or Georgia, Mississippi, or other parts of the South, you see hundreds and thousands and millions of registered African-American voters. Mississippi today has the highest number of African-American elected officials in any state. Sometimes young people, maybe not college students like you, because you are so informed – you've been reading my book – but I hear young people saying sometimes, "Nothing has changed!"

I feel like saying, "Come and walk in my shoes!"

Things have changed. Our American nation is different. We're on our way toward the creation of a Beloved Community. So I say to Juniata students: Don't be afraid to get in the way. Don't be afraid to get in trouble – good trouble, necessary trouble to build the Beloved Community. Not here, just in America, but around the world. You have a rich history. This great college comes from a rich history. One of peace. One of love. One of nonviolence. You must be able to teach the rest of the world that maybe, just maybe, humankind should evolve to a high level. We should evolve to that point where violence and war are obsolete. They are obsolete.

Can we find a way to go a different direction? We are able to fly through the air like birds, swim through the ocean like a fish, and yet we cannot learn to live together here on this little planet, this little piece of real estate, like human beings. I think most of us in Washington – the decision makers, the policy makers, and people around the world – should take a lesson from the Civil Rights Movement.

Some of my colleagues in the Congress ask me from time to time, why didn't you give up? You got arrested forty times. You were beaten up, bloody and unconscious at the Greyhound Bus Station in May of 1961. You had a concussion at the bridge in Selma in 1965. But I tell them that Dr. King once said, "Hate is too

heavy of a burden to bear.” The way of love. The way of peace. That is the more excellent way.

I want to tell a little story about when I was growing up outside of Troy, Alabama, fifty miles from Montgomery. It’s a true story. I had an Aunt Seneva who lived in what we called a shotgun house. I know you don’t know what a shotgun house is, but my aunt lived in a shotgun house. She didn’t have a pretty, manicured lawn. She had a simple, plain, dirt yard. And sometimes at night, you could look up through the holes in the ceiling in her tin roof and count the stars.

For those of you who may not know what a shotgun house is: in a nonviolent sense, it’s an old house – with one way in, one way out. You can bounce a basketball through the front door, and it will go straight through the back door. In a military sense, it’s an old house – one way in, one way out. And you can fire a shotgun through the front door, and the bullets go straight through the back door. My Aunt Seneva lived in a shotgun house.

One Saturday afternoon, a group of my brothers and sisters and a few of my first cousins, about twelve or fifteen of us young children were playing in my aunt’s dirt yard. An unbelievable storm came up. The wind started blowing. The thunder started rolling. The lightning started flashing. And the rain started beating on the tin roof of that old shotgun house. My Aunt Seneva became terrified. She started crying. She thought that old house was going to blow away. So she got all of us little children together and told us to hold hands. And we did as we were told.

The wind continued to blow. The thunder continued to roll. The lightning continued to flash. And the rain continued to beat on the roof of this old shotgun house. And we cried and we cried. And when one corner of this old house appeared to be lifting from its foundation, my aunt had us go up to that corner of the house and try to hold the house down with our little bodies. When the other corner appeared to be lifting, she had us to go off to the other side to try to hold the house down with our little bodies. We were little children walking with the wind. But we never, ever left the house. That’s what the Civil Rights Movement in America was all about. We were trying to hold our American house together. The Movement was saying, in effect, that maybe, just maybe, our foremothers and our forefathers all came to this great land in different

ships, but we're all in the same boat now. It doesn't matter if you're black or white, Hispanic, Asian-American, or Native American. We're one people. We're one family. We're one house. Not just the American house but we are part of the world house. We all must do what we can to save this planet, this little piece of real estate we call Earth.

As we move toward a new day, a new era, we must choose, as Martin Luther King, Jr. once said: "We must all learn to live together as brothers and sister or perish as fools." A lesson of peace. A lesson of nonviolence. The way of peace. The way of nonviolence. The way of love. A much better way. I say to you tonight. Walk with the wind. Let the spirit of peace and love and freedom be your guide. Thank you very much.

