

ESSAY ROUNDTABLE

Justice and Good Trouble

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Abstract

This essay examines the life and leadership of the late congressman John Lewis as it illustrates key dimensions of American history, including slavery, the exploitative sharecropping economy, the protests of the Civil Rights Movement and student activism. This embodiment of the American experience rendered him a unique national leader and conscience of the Congress. Lewis is presented as fulfilling key rhetorical dimensions of the public intellectual as moralist for the nation.

Keywords: Slavery; sharecropping; Civil Rights Movement; public intellectuals

When you see something that is not right, not just, not fair, you have a moral obligation to say something, to do something.

—John Lewis¹

John Lewis was one of a kind. As I write this, I am aware of how profound a loss America absorbed with his death in July 2020. In his absence, no single national leader has assumed his distinctively stamped mantle of public moral leadership. That is no surprise.

I believe that he was singular because his life story was in so many ways common and familiar to the people he served but also unusual for its trajectory and lasting impact. One might think that a Black boy from rural Alabama would be an unlikely candidate for inclusion among other national and international symbols of exemplary moral authority like Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Mother Theresa. Yet his stature was unmistakable in the power corridors of America and beyond. His grit, humility, moral clarity, and courage transformed him into a global symbol for justice, and for his distinctive brand of “good trouble.” That is how he became the “conscience of the Congress.”

John Lewis accepted and exercised a unique moral vocation for the nation. But he would eschew efforts to exaggerate his role and impact. He was one part of a vast team. Indeed, there were many civil rights heroes and heroines, and only a few still survive. Each brought something distinctive and necessary for the effective advance of the Civil Rights Movement. It was central casting from above.

Rosa Parks was a determined and disciplined activist and churchwoman who worked as a seamstress at the Montgomery Fair department store, but at the right moment she took the step of defying a formidable, yet fragile, system of white supremacy. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was the public intellectual with the mesmerizing moral voice who framed a narrowly focused protest in a small town as a universal drama of good versus evil. Ella Baker was

¹ 165 Congressional Record H12167 (daily edition Dec. 18, 2019).



the grassroots organizing genius who encouraged student activists to craft their own movement free of the interference and egotism of traditional “great male leaders.” Andrew Young became the calm, smooth diplomat who read human nature, fear, and self-interest with keen eyes. And C. T. Vivian emerged to be an eloquent shepherd who stood in the path of the swinging baton of a raging “Bull” Connor in order to demand justice.² But it was John Lewis, who embodied the spirit of youthful and hopeful good trouble, and sustained that spirit across an entire lifetime.

A Symbol of Justice and Trouble

The philosopher Paul Ricoeur wrote, “the symbol gives rise to thought.”³ John Lewis became a symbol of good trouble early on, and during the course of his life he fleshed out this notion through a series of essays and books, including a graphic novel written for children as a comic book trilogy. My favorite photos of Lewis show him with large bandages seemingly holding his head together, seated next to an admiring and well-groomed Dr. King. In short, John Lewis evolved to symbolize justice as a disruptive force.

Disruptive justice upsets uninterrogated inequality. It demands acknowledgment, intervention, correction, and ongoing evaluation. This concept of good trouble at the center of Lewis’s legacy, the claim that some forms of disruptive moral action are deserving of praise and emulation is ancient but requires continuous embodiment for its lasting impact. As Susan Sontag observed, “At the center of our moral life and our moral imagination are the great models of resistance; the great stories of those who have said no.”⁴ I think that reflecting on Lewis’s life should invite all of us to identify the “great stories” of righteous resistance in the fields of law and of religion. For in keeping those stories and advocates, teachers and prophets alive, we keep alive our own fund of exemplars who inspire us to safeguard truth and the common good.

A symbol can give rise to thought. Lewis’s biography itself can be read as a great story of leveraging personal experience to point beyond to larger collective narratives of ethical struggle. As I read his life, there are compelling reference points to the larger narrative of African American life, especially the experiences of human bondage, resistance to enslavement, the Reconstruction of the nation guided by Black elected officials, and the evergreen energies of young people to sustain the hard work of crafting a more perfect union.

Slavery and Resistance

In a wonderful biography of Lewis, historian Jon Meacham observed:

For John Lewis, slavery wasn’t an abstraction. It was as real to him as his great-grandfather, Frank Carter, who lived until his great-grandson was seven. . . . Carter, whom Lewis called “Grandpapa,” had been born into enslavement in Pike County, Alabama, in 1862. . . . The trajectory of the infant Frank Carter’s life was fundamentally changed on Thursday, January 1, 1863, when President Lincoln declared the enslaved in the seceded Confederate States of America were now free, and by the ratification, in December 1865, of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which abolished slavery “within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”⁵

² Theophilus Eugene “Bull” Connor was commissioner of public safety in Birmingham, Alabama, for two decades and a violent opponent of Civil Rights protest.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 237.

⁴ Susan Sontag, “Of Courage and Resistance,” *The Nation*, May 5, 2003, <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/courage-and-resistance/>.

⁵ Jon Meacham, *His Truth Is Marching On: John Lewis and the Power of Hope* (New York: Random House, 2020), 19.

This is one way that symbols work: they focus attention and invite viewers into greater curiosity about the narratives of a collective past that shaped the symbol. Lewis often observed that many educated white and Black Americans seemed to be unaware of the history, debates, and justifications offered in law and religion for the long existence of slavery in a young, idealistic nation.⁶ Some of this ignorance was rooted in denial, and perhaps some in shame. Many textbooks treated the topic gingerly and frequently misrepresented a brutal system of exploitation and torture as a benign system of productive labor and Christian socialization. As the historian Edward Baptist has noted in, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism*, “The idea that the commodification and suffering and forced labor of African Americans is what made the United States powerful and rich is not an idea that people necessarily are happy to hear.”⁷

Between 1774, just before the Revolution, and 1804 just after America doubled in size through the Louisiana Purchase, “all of the northern states abolished slavery” while the “strange institution” continued to thrive in the South.⁸ Although Congress outlawed importing Africans in 1807, the slave trade flourished within the United States. One can visit places now, as my family did recently, where historical markers remind us of auction houses in beloved American cities like Charleston, South Carolina, New Orleans, Louisiana, and Savannah, Georgia, where the sale of human persons was normal market behavior. It should also be noted that in each of those locations, there were congregations, and Black newspapers, and organization leadership conventions where resistance was cultivated.⁹

Lewis was reared in rural Alabama because, like hundreds of thousands of other African Americans, his family emerged from the era of enslavement and entered into the continued servitude of sharecropping, working tirelessly to make others wealthy. In his person and moral compass, Lewis carried the experience of dispossession from the land, exploitation of labor, and humiliation of caste. He knew what it was like to live in a shack you did not own and to work for a pittance paid by those who did not care how great a cost to human dignity each backbreaking day exacted. He saw the devastating impact of decisions made by faraway politicians, business leaders, and clerics. And although his family counseled against agitation and causing trouble, one could see that Lewis was already on a different course, preparing to disrupt unjust decisions and abuses of power.

One of the more inspiring and noble narratives running through American history was the early and persistent agitation of white and free Black abolitionists and slave insurrectionists who sought to dismantle this offense to reason and morality by any means necessary. Consequently, in telling the story of slavery, victimization should always be set alongside narratives of Black agency on behalf of their freedom. Far from the stereotypes of passive, obsequious slaves, Black people acted boldly often rebelling violently against enslavement. The names of Harriet Tubman, John Brown, Thaddeus Stevens, and Frederick Douglass remind us of a tradition worthy of the title “good trouble” that helped

⁶ Many educated Americans have displayed a noteworthy ignorance of events in American history that do not center on the history of European immigration to the New World. Consider former US senator Rick Santorum’s comments: “We came here and created a blank slate. We birthed a nation from nothing. I mean, there was nothing here. I mean, yes, we have Native Americans but, candidly, there isn’t much Native American culture in American culture [.]” Shannon Larson, “‘We Came Here and Created a Blank Slate.’ Rick Santorum, CNN under Fire Following Commentator’s Dismissal of Native American Culture,” *Boston Globe*, April 27, 2021, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/04/27/nation/we-came-here-created-blank-slate-rick-santorum-cnn-under-fire-following-commentators-dismissal-native-american-culture/>.

⁷ Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 19–20.

⁸ “Slavery in America,” History (website), November 12, 2009, updated April 20, 2021, <https://www.history.com/topics/black-history/slavery>.

⁹ The Black Press Research Collective is dedicated to generating digital scholarship and archiving the early Black press. See Black Press Research Collective, <http://blackpressresearchcollective.org> (last visited July 27, 2021).

force a profound moral reckoning and a final decision about the future of slavery. Lewis carried these multitudes within, and he would soon find avenues for expressing resistance.

Skirmishes and precursors to the Civil War loomed for decades before the shots that started the war were exchanged at Fort Sumter, South Carolina. Politics rarely aspired to abolish the depraved practice but rather found creative ways to perpetuate its injustice, for example through the Missouri Compromise and the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation to liberate more than three million enslaved African Americans in the rebel states, among them Lewis's great-grandpapa Carter. The memory and manifestations of American slavery proved central in his family identity and collective past, and those memories fueled his evolving public vocation.

After a tumultuous Civil War, in which some 620,000 Americans slaughtered each other in more than 10,500 battles and engagements fought over four years, the practice of American slavery came to an end.¹⁰ President Lincoln was among the multitude of lives sacrificed to redeem the nation from slavery to freedom. A brief but consequential twelve-year period followed the war and bore the hopeful name of "Reconstruction."

Extending Reconstruction

As Lewis made his journey from the farm to the city of Nashville for college (American Baptist College and later, Fisk University) he joined and led the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. He found community among courageous students willing to sacrifice themselves to bring an end to segregation. In doing so, these young protesters proved themselves great American patriots working for a more perfect union. On college campuses and city streets, he was baptized into the transforming energies of student hope and activism. He claimed his vocation and found a growing audience for his messages of freedom and hope. Life on the farm prepared him for the academy and student movement leadership. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee prepared him for national leadership and ultimately a seat in Congress.

There, he embodied the nearly forgotten legacy of distinguished public service for America provided by more than 1,500 Black officeholders. After a life of organizing, protest, and struggle, he was elected to high office and not only occupied one of 435 seats in the House of Representatives but also was elevated to become a guide and guardian of conscience for all of his colleagues in Congress. Courageous activism in Congress was a way for John Lewis to channel the spirit of student protest into electoral politics. As Meacham notes, "Lewis was devoted to preserving and passing on the lessons of the 1950s and '60s."¹¹

In 2016, Lewis led a sit-in on the floor of the House of Representatives to press the then-Republican majority to bring a gun-reform bill to a vote. He declared, "We have been too quiet for too long. . . . There comes a time when you have to say something. You have to make a little noise. You have to move your feet. This is the time. How many more mothers? How many more fathers need to shed tears of grief before we do something?"¹²

Given his family's deep-seated caution about making trouble in the Deep South, could it be that Lewis was preaching to his own family and community? Not out of judgment but profound empathy and faith that although trouble can follow moral protest and people can get hurt, as indeed John did, change for the better can come from good trouble to renew the arc of the moral universe and redeem our nation from its original sin.

¹⁰ "Civil War Facts," American Battlefield Trust, August 16, 2011, updated April 20, 2021, <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/articles/civil-war-facts>.

¹¹ Meacham, *His Truth is Marching On*, 238.

¹² Quoted in Meacham, 237.

His biography speaks to us of human enslavement and the political decisions that preserved the strange institution. And it speaks to a history of resistance and public service. But it is how he redefined the role of a congressperson that makes him remarkable. A final facet of the life story of John Lewis centers on his role as a public moralist and intellectual.

The Public Moralist

Communicating with the larger world was important to John Lewis. We get a clue from his childhood in his desire to preach to an audience, to offer hope to whomever would listen. And in the absence of human listeners, his church of chickens was always available. This vignette proves all the more remarkable when a quarter of a million people gathered for the 1963 March on Washington, Lewis rose to address them as a speaker, and not only the youngest of all the speakers but he also wielded an extraordinary lever of moral influence as the hosts and organizers worried about what he would say and how strongly he would speak against racial oppression. The boy who preached to chickens on the farm now admonished the nation, inspired its hopes, and called it to action.

I teach a class at the Candler School of Theology on religion and public intellectuals. It affords students an opportunity to examine the public discourse of people who have influenced the moral compass of our democracy. Some of our subjects are religious, many are not. We explore the moral habits and moral impact of morally compelling public intellectuals. In a brilliant essay titled, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals,” Noam Chomsky, one of America’s preeminent public intellectuals observed, “Intellectuals are in a position to expose the lies of government, to analyze actions according to their causes and motives and often hidden intentions. . . . [T]hey have the power that comes from political liberty, access to information and freedom of expression.”¹³ Chomsky provides insight into a critical need of modern societies, namely, institutions and individuals who possess analytic and expressive skills to hold powerful institutions and individuals accountable, and the courage to pay the cost of such prophetic leadership.

A few days after Rosa Parks refused to yield her seat, thereby breaking local segregation laws, Martin Luther King, Jr. was recruited to offer leadership for the Black community’s response to her arrest. As community leaders decided to declare a bus boycott, King delivered his first public address from the pulpit of the Holt Street Baptist Church to the city. Although he referred to the immediate crisis, he began to place it into a new context framing one woman’s arrest as an expression of the ancient and monumental contest of right versus wrong, a contest that would test the relevance and moral authority of sacred scripture, the US Constitution, and the cherished democratic ideals and rhetoric of the founding fathers. Public intellectuals help us to perceive and construe the implications of questionable relations of power and the voices of authority that underlie an unjust status quo and justify it. Implicit in their work is the question, “What can be done to correct this injustice and preserve or enhance our democracy?”

Five tasks are typical of these individuals. First, public moralists and intellectuals frame seemingly mundane political and social issues into larger moral dramas that require our attention. Second, public moralists offer concrete responses to the large questions of moral direction and aspiration. We note that moralists draw upon a variety of genres to answer the pressing question including stories, statistics, personal testimony, and policy prescriptions.

Third, they communicate with a wide and diverse audience, rather than preaching to the proverbial choir. Their aim is to engage and persuade all rational people. That is what makes them public thinkers and voices. Fourth, they accomplish their work in accessible and

¹³ Noam Chomsky, “The Responsibility of Intellectuals,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 23, 1967, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1967/02/23/a-special-supplement-the-responsibility-of-intelle/>.

relatively concise terms. That is, they communicate in short form, a form that does not require days and weeks of difficult reading or listening. Given the communication trends of a popular culture saturated by social media, this may be a distinct advantage that public intellectuals enjoy over their colleagues in the academy. Fifth, they call people to action, to think first and then to act. They empower and authorize others to get into trouble, good and necessary.

John Lewis relished this role. He earned a national and international platform through his election to Congress. Once in Congress, he won a second sort of election. He was elevated to serve as “conscience of the Congress” in exercising the power of political liberty to enable the nation to fulfill its moral destiny by keeping its founding promise of liberty and justice for all.

Just before he died, Lewis wrote a pastoral letter to the next generation. I will never forget how I first saw it. After his death on July 17, 2020, his funeral was held on Thursday, July 30, at the Ebenezer Baptist Church, home parish of Dr. King, and currently led by the Reverend Raphael Warnock, who is also a US senator. While waiting for the planeload of members of Congress and three former US presidents to process into the church, I discovered the letter in the *New York Times*. It was a haunting moment to hear Lewis’s voice ring out from the page, as his flag draped coffin rested at the center of the church just below the pulpit.

The letter John Lewis wrote is titled, “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation.” It is a message of gratitude, reflection, hope, and a call to responsible moral action. He expresses appreciation for how young protesters in America and around the globe inspired him and gave him hope for the future of democracy. He writes of the parallels between his early years of protest and theirs. As a good elder should do, he urges them to study history to glean lessons of effective, disciplined nonviolent activism. He reminds them that, “Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I call good trouble, necessary trouble.” He also affirms that “the vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in democratic society.” Then, with his final words to the world, he prays: “So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.”¹⁴

Conclusion

When America saw John Lewis, it was encountering an American life through the lens of a complicated, tortured history illustrating several important chapters of the American story: slavery, resistance, Reconstruction, the Civil Rights Movement, and the activism of young people around the globe. His final photograph, standing with COVID-19 mask in Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington, DC, was a visual reminder of his solidarity with contemporary youth. He stood there as a symbol of the world’s most powerful government and as a symbol of the spirit of justice as good trouble that is required to preserve a democracy. And, in his final message with its wisdom, warmth, and empathy, he demonstrated something missing in our national life and politics today, as Plato suggested, that politics should aspire to be the highest form of the art of caring for souls.

¹⁴ John R. Lewis, “Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation,” *New York Times*, July 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-civil-rights-america.html>.