NOTE: The essay which follows was written by Congressman John Lewis who died on July 17, 2020. Congressman Lewis directed that it be published on the day of his funeral. It was published by the New York Times in accordance with his directions on July 30, 2020.

Congressman Lewis, regarded by his colleagues as the “Conscience of the Congress,” was eulogized by three Presidents (George Bush, Bill Clinton, and Barak Obama), and numerous national leaders, friends, and family members. Congressman Lewis was a gifted man with a rare combination of humility, a resolve of steel, and clear vision of what had to be done in America if we are to “form a more perfect union.” He came to the attention of the nation as a civil rights leader in 1963 when at the age of 23 he was the youngest person to speak at the March on Washington. The speech he wrote and intended to give closed with these words: “By the force of our demands, our determination and our numbers, we shall splinter the segregated South into a thousand pieces and put them together in the image of God and democracy. We must say: ‘Wake up, America. Wake up!’ For we cannot stop, and we will not and cannot be patient.” However, Dr. King and others urged him to tone it down. The speech Congressman Lewis delivered that day closed with these words: “If we do not get meaningful legislation out of this Congress, the time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. We will march through the South through the streets of Jackson, through the streets of Danville, through the streets of Cambridge, through the streets of Birmingham. But we will march with the spirit of love and with the spirit of dignity that we have shown here today.”

For some wonderful photographs of Congressman Lewis, and more details about his life and what drove him to run for Congress, see Time Magazine “In His Own Words,” by John Bates (Aug. 3-Aug. 10, 2020).

Peter Agnes

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“While my time here has now come to an end, I want you to know that in the last days and hours of my life you inspired me. You filled me with hope about the next chapter of the great American story when you used your power to make a difference in our society. Millions of people motivated simply by human compassion laid down the burdens of division. Around the country and the world you set aside race, class, age, language and nationality to demand respect for human dignity.

That is why I had to visit Black Lives Matter Plaza in Washington, though I was admitted to the hospital the following day. I just had to see and feel it for myself that, after many years of silent witness, the truth is still marching on.

Emmett Till was my George Floyd. He was my Rayshard Brooks, Sandra Bland and Breonna Taylor. He was 14 when he was killed, and I was only 15 years old at the time. I will never ever
forget the moment when it became so clear that he could easily have been me. In those days, fear
constrained us like an imaginary prison, and troubling thoughts of potential brutality committed
for no understandable reason were the bars.

Though I was surrounded by two loving parents, plenty of brothers, sisters and cousins, their
love could not protect me from the unholy oppression waiting just outside that family circle.
Unchecked, unrestrained violence and government-sanctioned terror had the power to turn a
simple stroll to the store for some Skittles or an innocent morning jog down a lonesome country
road into a nightmare. If we are to survive as one unified nation, we must discover what so
readily takes root in our hearts that could rob Mother Emanuel Church in South Carolina of her
brightest and best, shoot unwitting concertgoers in Las Vegas and choke to death the hopes and
dreams of a gifted violinist like Elijah McClain.

Like so many young people today, I was searching for a way out, or some might say a way in,
and then I heard the voice of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on an old radio. He was talking about
the philosophy and discipline of nonviolence. He said we are all complicit when we tolerate
injustice. He said it is not enough to say it will get better by and by. He said each of us has a
moral obligation to stand up, speak up and speak out. When you see something that is not right,
you must say something. You must do something. Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each
generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and
world society at peace with itself.

Ordinary people with extraordinary vision can redeem the soul of America by getting in what I
call good trouble, necessary trouble. Voting and participating in the democratic process are key.
The vote is the most powerful nonviolent change agent you have in a democratic society. You
must use it because it is not guaranteed. You can lose it.

You must also study and learn the lessons of history because humanity has been involved in this
soul-wrenching, existential struggle for a very long time. People on every continent have stood in
your shoes, through decades and centuries before you. The truth does not change, and that is why
the answers worked out long ago can help you find solutions to the challenges of our time.
Continue to build union between movements stretching across the globe because we must put
away our willingness to profit from the exploitation of others.

Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and
stand up for what you truly believe. In my life I have done all I can to demonstrate that the way
of peace, the way of love and nonviolence is the more excellent way. Now it is your turn to let
freedom ring.

When historians pick up their pens to write the story of the 21st century, let them say that it was
your generation who laid down the heavy burdens of hate at last and that peace finally triumphed
over violence, aggression and war. 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.”

Congressman John Lewis