Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of Our Nation

By John Lewis

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 compassion laid down the burdens of division. Around the country and the world, they stood 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.

Though I am gone, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe.

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 waging 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.

The lessons are there for the learning.

We face an uncertain future. We have reasons to be afraid. But as I was reminded in Memphis, we’ve faced far worse before. We have a manual for resistance. We have models of courage and clarity. We see from where we stand, or kneel, or lie. What Theodore Roethke wrote, “In a dark time the eye begins to see.” Some look around and see only darkness, while others, a shaft of light. Some look at the streets and see insurrection, others, uprising. We see from where we stand, or kneel, or lie. What will rise from the ashes of the tens of thousands of acres of burned mountain forests and from our city streets? Yes, fire destroys. It also purifies and illuminates, making way for something altogether new. Be warned, status quo of patriarchy, racism, sexism, nationalism, capitalism: resurrection is threatening. The writing’s been on the wall long enough. The midnight scream is being heard—at last.

No, we won’t find a retaining wall to hold up our state of affairs crumbling under the weight of the dominant power structure.

Perhaps we can only hear them when our backs are up against the wall—a wall of our own creation. Tohono O’odham poet Ophelia Zepeda writes: “Tagging is a scream at midnight audible at dawn.” Can we hear it? Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “A riot is the language of the unheard.” Are we able to recognize it?

Theodore Roethke wrote, “In a dark time the eye begins to see.” Some look around and see only darkness, while others, a shaft of light. Some look at the streets and see insurrection, others, uprising. We see from where we stand, or kneel, or lie. What will rise from the ashes of the tens of thousands of acres of burned mountain forests and from our city streets? Yes, fire destroys. It also purifies and illuminates, making way for something altogether new. Be warned, status quo of patriarchy, racism, sexism, nationalism, capitalism: resurrection is threatening. The writing’s been on the wall long enough. The midnight scream is being heard—at last.

No, we won’t find a retaining wall to hold up our state of affairs crumbling under the weight of the dominant power structure.

Its safety nets have large holes. As Audre Lourde so prophetically and plainly said: “The master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house.” Those are the tools that built it after all. They are designed to preserve it. Neither ballot nor bomb, atomic or conventional, will get us any closer to an egalitarian society. These are the master’s tools. It is only we, the people, altogether, the grassroots, who have the construction tools, let alone the vision, to build something authentically new in the shell of the old.

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.

—John Lewis, civil rights leader, co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and 17-term member of Congress from Georgia, wrote this essay shortly before his death July 17 at age 80.

Uprising, Not Insurrection

By John Heid

People say to me, oh you gotta be crazy to dream in times like these. Don’t you read the news? Don’t you know the score? / How can you dream when so many others grieve? And yet, here I am, dreaming.

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 implicit when we tolerate injustice. He said it is not implicit when we tolerate injustice. He said it is not implicit when we tolerate injustice. He said it is not implicit when we tolerate injustice.


We have the playbook. We have a manual for resistance. We have models of courage and clarity. But as I was reminded in Memphis, we’ve faced far worse before. We face an uncertain future. We have reasons to be afraid. The lessons are there for the learning.

We see from where we stand, or kneel, or lie. What will rise from the ashes of the tens of thousands of acres of burned mountain forests and from our city streets? Yes, fire destroys. It also purifies and illuminates, making way for something altogether new. Be warned, status quo of patriarchy, racism, sexism, nationalism, capitalism: resurrection is threatening. The writing’s been on the wall long enough. The midnight scream is being heard—at last.

No, we won’t find a retaining wall to hold up our state of affairs crumbling under the weight of the dominant power structure.

Perhaps we can only hear them when our backs are up against the wall—a wall of our own creation. Tohono O’odham poet Ophelia Zepeda writes: “Tagging is a scream at midnight audible at dawn.” Can we hear it? Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “A riot is the language of the unheard.” Are we able to recognize it?

Theodore Roethke wrote, “In a dark time the eye begins to see.” Some look around and see only darkness, while others, a shaft of light. Some look at the streets and see insurrection, others, uprising. We see from where we stand, or kneel, or lie. What will rise from the ashes of the tens of thousands of acres of burned mountain forests and from our city streets? Yes, fire destroys. It also purifies and illuminates, making way for something altogether new. Be warned, status quo of patriarchy, racism, sexism, nationalism, capitalism: resurrection is threatening. The writing’s been on the wall long enough. The midnight scream is being heard—at last.

No, we won’t find a retaining wall to hold up our state of affairs crumbling under the weight of the dominant power structure.

Its safety nets have large holes. As Audre Lourde so prophetically and plainly said: “The master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house.” Those are the tools that built it after all. They are designed to preserve it. Neither ballot nor bomb, atomic or conventional, will get us any closer to an egalitarian society. These are the master’s tools. It is only we, the people, altogether, the grassroots, who have the construction tools, let alone the vision, to build something authentically new in the shell of the old.

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.

—John Lewis, civil rights leader, co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and 17-term member of Congress from Georgia, wrote this essay shortly before his death July 17 at age 80.

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.

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 are the answer. Now is the time for everyone to walk a different way. Now it is your turn to let freedom ring.

As I was reminded in Memphis, we’ve faced far worse before. We face an uncertain future. We have reasons to be afraid. The lessons are there for the learning.

We see from where we stand, or kneel, or lie. What will rise from the ashes of the tens of thousands of acres of burned mountain forests and from our city streets? Yes, fire destroys. It also purifies and illuminates, making way for something altogether new. Be warned, status quo of patriarchy, racism, sexism, nationalism, capitalism: resurrection is threatening. The writing’s been on the wall long enough. The midnight scream is being heard—at last.

No, we won’t find a retaining wall to hold up our state of affairs crumbling under the weight of the dominant power structure.

Perhaps we can only hear them when our backs are up against the wall—a wall of our own creation. Tohono O’odham poet Ophelia Zepeda writes: “Tagging is a scream at midnight audible at dawn.” Can we hear it? Martin Luther King, Jr. said: “A riot is the language of the unheard.” Are we able to recognize it?

Theodore Roethke wrote, “In a dark time the eye begins to see.” Some look around and see only darkness, while others, a shaft of light. Some look at the streets and see insurrection, others, uprising. We see from where we stand, or kneel, or lie. What will rise from the ashes of the tens of thousands of acres of burned mountain forests and from our city streets? Yes, fire destroys. It also purifies and illuminates, making way for something altogether new. Be warned, status quo of patriarchy, racism, sexism, nationalism, capitalism: resurrection is threatening. The writing’s been on the wall long enough. The midnight scream is being heard—at last.

No, we won’t find a retaining wall to hold up our state of affairs crumbling under the weight of the dominant power structure.

Its safety nets have large holes. As Audre Lourde so prophetically and plainly said: “The master’s tools cannot dismantle the master’s house.” Those are the tools that built it after all. They are designed to preserve it. Neither ballot nor bomb, atomic or conventional, will get us any closer to an egalitarian society. These are the master’s tools. It is only we, the people, altogether, the grassroots, who have the construction tools, let alone the vision, to build something authentically new in the shell of the old.

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.

—John Lewis, civil rights leader, co-founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and 17-term member of Congress from Georgia, wrote this essay shortly before his death July 17 at age 80.