

### John Lewis: Changing Lives for the Better

Some hurts only last a while, but others, seem to last forever. I still remember the hurt I suffered in third grade when, for perhaps the first time, I endured what I now would call a type of cultural bias. My mom, an immigrant from India, prepared a special lunch for me--Indian dosa and chutney. When I sat at the cafeteria table, I was excited to show all my friends what Indian food looked like. Almost immediately, a girl named Jacey killed that excitement when, with a dismissive look, she said my lunch looked disgusting, and sneeringly suggested I should eat normal American food. At that moment--and to be honest, even now-- I didn't feel civil to Jacey, didn't want to collaborate with her, or have anything to do with her. That's why I find it amazing to learn the story of John Lewis, the U.S. Representative of Georgia who died on July 17, 2020. Hurt in more ways than I can imagine--not only emotionally, but physically, and psychologically-- he persevered, through a dedication to civics, civility, and collaboration, to become a giant in the Civil Rights Movement of the United States.

Taking civics seriously--the rights and duties of citizenship--was made clear to my immigrant parents from the very beginning. As part of their citizenship, they had to learn a citizen's rights and duties under the Constitution. That's why in the intervening years, they have exercised their duty to vote and enjoyed their right to practice their Hindu religion freely. On a much larger scale, John Lewis took his rights and duties as a citizen very seriously. For example, in exercising his right to free speech, he was outspoken about the Black Lives Matter Movement, speaking to news channels in the weeks following George Floyd's passing. As an elected representative for the area around Atlanta, he dutifully fought for disadvantaged and discriminated people and tried to lead the Congress to build a world without poverty, war, or

racism. Perhaps his dedication to civics is most obvious in the following statement, which he made on the floor of the House of Representatives: “When you see something that is not right, not just, not fair, you have a moral obligation to say something.”(Seelye)

For weeks after that incident, I was uncivil to Jacey-- Fearing that if I spoke to her I would lash out in anger and make remarks I didn't mean, I ignored her. For his part, however, showing incredible self-control and respect, Mr. Lewis stayed civil even while protesting the unfair discrimination in Nashville. In February 1960, Lewis and other students entered a whites-only restaurant and cordially demanded service. An eyewitness, David Halberstam recounted the scene, “The protests had been conducted with exceptional dignity, and gradually one image had come to prevail — that of elegant, courteous young Black people, holding to their Gandhian principles, seeking the most elemental of rights, while being assaulted by young white hoodlums who beat them up and on occasion extinguished cigarettes on their bodies.” Consequently, three months after the sit-in, Nashville became one of the first desegregated cities. At around the same time, a split was occurring in the movement, those who wanted to show their rage through violence, and those who desired to stay peaceful. Lewis chose to remain nonviolent and became the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee chairman. Becoming chairman of an organization focused primarily on nonviolence takes incredible civility, and Mr. John Lewis embodies that principle.

After that event at lunch, collaboration was not on the menu when Jacey and I were in the same area. That's why I was astonished after learning how John Lewis collaborated with people he may not have liked to create a better reality for others. After all, Lewis was a primary organizer of the March on Washington at only 23. He spoke at the march, rallying the crowd with enthusiasm. “Unless Title III is put in this bill,” Lewis remarked, “there's nothing to protect the

young children and old women who must face police dogs and fire hoses in the South while they engage in a peaceful demonstration. In its present form, this bill will not protect the citizens of Danville, Virginia, who must live in constant fear of a police state.” The speech Mr. Lewis gave, set up the stage for Martin Luther King’s famous “I Have a Dream.” Lewis collaborated with the other organizers for the march to revise each other’s speeches, showing that he represents that value.

As I think back on the third-grade lunch incident, I now realize that the cultural bias I experienced derived from the fact that my parents are immigrants. I also realize that the racial bias John Lewis experienced derived from the fact that his parents were poor black sharecroppers. In responding to my bias, I could have taken a lesson from how he responded to his. As John Lewis led the March from Selma to Montgomery, as he spoke at the March on Washington, as he led campaigns to end inequality and ensure justice, he could never know whether those endeavors would be fruitful. However, through the values of civics, civility, and collaboration, Mr. Lewis managed to change lives with his reforms. Even though he justifiably might have wanted nothing to do with the Jaceys in his life, he still managed to work through everything and better this country. This icon of the Civil Rights Movement remains alive as a role model to every American citizen.

### Works Cited

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