Chapel Talk
Martin Luther King, Jr. Chapel
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"Together, You Can Redeem the Soul of our Nation"
by John Lewis, as read by Morgan Freeman. Published in *The New York Times* 30 July 2020

I'd like to talk tonight about stories. This might, initially, seem an odd topic for a historian, and perhaps all the more so today, when a Delawarean was inaugurated as the new President, and the first woman - a Black, Indian-American daughter of immigrants - was inaugurated as Vice President. Today, as we continue our celebration of the lives and work of Martin Luther King and John Lewis, and of the movement for civil rights and racial justice that they and so many others made real. Today, exactly two weeks after a white supremacist, anti-statist insurrection took place at the Capitol, fomented and cheered on by the President of the United States. There is *so much **his**tory* that is crucial to understanding what we are experiencing - the "lessons of history" that we "must study and learn," as Congressman Lewis put it - and I'm going to talk about *stories*?

But as I re-read John Lewis's last letter to us - to ***you***, really, because he was speaking, first and foremost, to young people - I found myself dwelling on the power and the importance of stories: the stories we tell as a nation, and the stories we tell - and are told - as individuals. The stories that are forgotten, and the stories that are intentionally erased. It's no accident, I think, that Congressman Lewis framed his essay by describing "the great American story," and suggesting how you might participate in the writing of "the next chapter." We make sense of our world, and our own place in it, by constructing narratives.

Two weeks ago today, as we watched the Capitol building - the People's House - under siege, many of us heard the same story, over and over: "This is not who we are. This is America. This is not who we are." As we struggled to make sense of what we were seeing, in our horror, some of us may have clung to, told ourselves, and repeated to others that version of the story: "this is not who we are."

It is a comforting narrative, a story that makes the mob's attack on the peaceful transfer of democratic power an aberration, the exception in our exceptional history. People compared what unfolded at the

Capitol to anti-democratic coups in foreign countries, as if doing so would make it, somehow, less fundamentally American (all the while ignoring the role America has too often played in supporting authoritarianism abroad). People talked about this demonstration of white nationalism with shock, revealing their assumption that white supremacy - at least in any overt, serious form - was something of our distant past.

Consider the **costs** of this story. If a violent white supremacist attack on the Capitol, and its instigation by the highest elected official in the land, is an *exception* to the great national story of freedom and democracy, how easy does it become for us to dismiss it, to forget it, to say that, in the interest of unity and healing, we should simply move on, without interrogating the forces in the American past *and* present that led to January 6th? When we do this - protecting ourselves from asking hard questions about race, power, and justice in this country, and refraining from considering the historical limits on our democratic impulses - it becomes all too easy to congratulate ourselves on the triumphant story of continued American progress, to ignore that when Americans privilege unity over justice, it is typically at the expense of people of color, and to see the work of the Civil Rights Movement as ***finished***.

Throughout his life, John Lewis called on us - and most importantly, on **you** as young people - to resist a narrative that suggests the work of the movement for justice is behind us, or that "healing" can be achieved without a reconciliation grounded in truth. This is one of the most powerful arguments of his last letter that we just heard. I was struck by how deeply *present* he made the Civil Rights Movement in one particular moment in the letter, as he described his childhood: "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." Suddenly, he is not only John Lewis, the "Boy from Troy" in 1950s Alabama, but Trayvon Martin on a "stroll to the store for some Skittles," and Ahmaud Arbery on "an innocent morning jog down a lonesome country road." In linking his own history to that of the Movement for Black Lives today, Lewis insisted that we see the continuities in the American story of racial violence - and resistance.

Even as Congressman Lewis pushes us to tell a more complex story about our national past, he also challenges us to reconsider the story we tell about him - and about ourselves. Too often, when we focus our attention on leaders of the Civil Rights Movement like Martin Luther King and John Lewis,

we may feel ourselves shrink, awed by their greatness into the misconception that change can only happen through the work of now-iconic leaders - leaders who are no longer with us. Embracing that story disempowers us, and does so at a time when we most need to recognize and retrieve the power that can be ours. It is also *fundamentally antithetical* to the democratic values that were a north star for John Lewis throughout his leadership of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. I wonder if this isn't one of the reasons he told and retold that story about preaching to his chickens as a child (a story that will never fail to bring me joy): he wanted to make sure we didn't only see him as the poised young man speaking on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1963, or enduring a beating at the foot of the Pettus Bridge in 1965, or leading a sit-in on the floor of the House as an elder statesmen from Georgia in 2016.

So in the ongoing struggle for justice, John Lewis gives us the weapon of **this new story about ourselves** - that *we have the power*, as "Ordinary people… [to] redeem the soul of America by getting in… good trouble." Over the course of the last few days, since we watched the documentary on Congressman Lewis, you may have been mulling over what "good trouble" means. It is a concept that is, I think, both radical and simple. "When you see something that is not right," he exhorts us, "you must say something. You must do something." He particularly wanted this for you, as students, saying "I want to see young people in America feel the spirit of the 1960s and find a way to get in the way." He reminded us that citizenship cannot be passive: "Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part."

The other weapon John Lewis gives us in that final letter, of course, is **hope**. If we tell a truer story - about this country, and about ourselves - we can move towards achieving "the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself," he assures us. Indeed, this hope is one of the *many undeserved gifts* the Civil Rights Movement, and Black Americans, gave America: a belief that America *perhaps can be redeemed*, that we can one day more truly embody our best ideals.

Though he comes from a different tradition, and a different way of engaging politics, Tony Kushner, the Jewish playwright who wrote *Angels in America* and the screenplay for Steven Spielberg's *Lincoln*, puts it this way:

> I do not believe the wicked always win. I believe our despair is a lie we are telling ourselves. In many other periods of history, people, ordinary citizens, routinely set aside hours, days, time in

> their lives for doing the work of politics, some of which is glam and revolutionary and some of which is dull and electoral and tedious and not especially pure - and the world changed because of the work they did. That's what we're starting now. It requires setting aside the time to do it, and then doing it. Not any single one of us has to or possibly can save the world, but together in some sort of concert, in even not-especially-coordinated concert, with all of us working where we see work to be done, the world will change… Because this is a moment in history that needs us to begin, each of us every day at her or his own pace, slowly and surely rediscovering how to be politically active, how to organize our disparate energies into effective group action - and I choose to believe we will do what is required. Act. Organize. Assemble. Oppose. Resist. Find a place, a cause, a group, a friend, and start, today, now now now, continue continue continue. Being politically active is for the citizens of a democracy maybe the best way of speaking to God and hearing Her answer: You exist. If we are active, if we are activist, She replies to us: You specifically exist. Mazel tov. Now get busy, She replies. Maintain the world by changing the world.

Find your own way ***in***, as John Lewis did.

If changing the world sounds like an impossible and overwhelming task, consider one other voice from Jewish tradition, whose words you'll hear at the close of this evening's chapel: *"You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."*