Good Trouble

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Engage with Good Trouble

He was called the conscience of Congress, respected across the aisles. Through eulogies, obituaries and conversations with those who knew him — at protests, in the House of Representatives, through memorial marches over Edmund Pettus Bridge, in worship — and by listening to him and reading his works, we got to know John Lewis (D-Ga.).

In this resource guide, we provide material to introduce his life and the “good trouble” he encouraged those who believed in civil rights, equality and justice to engage in. Lewis’s “good trouble” provides a lesson in oxymorons as well as civil rights and civics.

In recent years others who served their country have died and been eulogized — including former President George H.W. Bush, Senator John McCain (R-Ariz.), and Rep. Elijah Cummings (D-Md.). Educators may use their lives and that of John Lewis to research and discuss principles of character and public service, of humans trying their best to improve the lives of others, of attempts to reach the ideals of the American democracy. As another election approaches, students may interview and read about local, state and national candidates. Who are these people and their policies and guiding life experiences? Have they engaged in good trouble?

NIKKI KAHN/THE WASHINGTON POST

2011: John Lewis said of his work with the civil rights movement: “Dr. King was my inspiration, my leader, my hero. If it hadn’t been for Martin Luther King Jr., I don’t know what would have happened to me, and to so many other people.”

On the cover: Clockwise from top left:

1917: African Americans march down New York City’s Fifth Avenue with only the muffled thump of drums. / THE NEW YORK TRIBUNE/LOC.GOV

2020: A yoga session is held Tuesday as part of the continuing protest for social justice at Black Lives Matter Plaza in the District / ASTRID RIECKEN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

2010: John Lewis receives the Presidential Medal of Freedom from President Barack Obama. / BILL O’LEARY/THE WASHINGTON POST

Tom Toles | ‘Good Trouble’  July 21, 2020

Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) passed away on Friday, July 17, at age 80. When a young man he helped organize the 1963 March on Washington and participated in many civil rights protests. “I have been in some kind of fight — for freedom, equality, basic human rights — for nearly my entire life,” Lewis said in December 2019 when he shared that he had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer.

Editorial cartoonists use minimum details, icons, symbols and labels to communicate.

1. Identify the setting. What details indicate that this is the setting?
2. One of the two figures is labeled.
   A. Who is he?
   B. Give three specific examples of his involvement in “good trouble”? 
3. Lewis is honest in summarizing his life.
   A. Who assures him that he is at the correct destination?
   B. What does this indicate about Lewis’ choices and legacy?
4. The greeter adds a second commentary.
   A. What does “duplicity” mean?
   B. Give two contemporary examples of “duplicitous evil.”
5. Toles’ alter ego resides in the lower right corner. In what way is this editorial cartoon a eulogy?
The Oxymoron

When we think of night, we think of dark skies, perhaps with stars and moonlight to help us to see. When we think of light, we think of the ability to see our surroundings. They are contrasting situations.

Things that are the same, are alike, identical or done in a similar way. Things that are different are not alike; they are distinct in form or quality.

With these two examples, we find we have a dilemma with the terms “night light” and the “same difference.” They are examples of oxymorons. So are “inside out,” “instant classic,” “passive aggressive” and “pretty ugly.”

An oxymoron is a figure of speech that is composed of apparently contradicting terms or contrasting ideas. They add stronger images to our expressions. They may be used for drama or laughter. People who use them enjoy being witty. Or want to entertain others. They may also add to better understanding of conditions or attitudes.

Think of the etymology of oxymoron to help you remember this term. It is made up of two Greek words: oskús that means “sharp” or “keen” and morós that means “dull” or “foolish.” So oxymoron has been an oxymoron since its beginning.

1. Give two examples of oxymorons. Include what they express or mean.
   A.
   B.

2. When Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.) passed away in July 2020, we were reminded of his admonition to people who cared about equality and civil rights to “[g]et in good trouble, necessary trouble, and help redeem the soul of America.” From his first protests he believed in nonviolence, but was beaten for them. What does he mean by “good trouble”? 
How to remember John Lewis

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Let’s not pretend the late representative John Lewis was always so universally loved and honored. When he spoke at the March on Washington in 1963, many Americans considered him a “militant” who pushed too hard for radical change and lacked the virtue of patience. March organizers made him tone down his speech, removing a provocative vow to “pursue our own scorched-earth policy and burn Jim Crow to the ground — nonviolently.”

The strident young firebrand who helped lead a revolution became, over the decades, an elder statesman widely acclaimed as an American hero. He never really changed, though. Instead, he and his compatriots in the civil rights crusade changed the world.

We have seen many iconic photographs of Lewis over the years — standing at the microphone in front of the Lincoln Memorial, posing for mug shots after his many arrests, leading an annual procession across the Edmund Pettus Bridge. For me, however, one of the truest images of this diminutive yet towering man was captured just last month. Rail-thin and ailing from pancreatic cancer, Lewis summoned the energy to visit newly christened Black Lives Matter Plaza near the White House and stood proudly on the 50-foot lettering, visible from space, that summed up his life’s work.

That’s who Lewis was: not a conciliator but an instigator. If he were young again, I have no doubt that he’d be on the front lines of the protest movement that arose following the killing of George Floyd. Lewis lived, fought and triumphed by the words of Frederick Douglass: “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.”

How, then, should we remember this great man? Not with fuzzy, feel-good encomiums but with a clear-eyed look at his monumental accomplishments and the work still left undone.

Lewis’s long career of activism reminds us that fundamental change does not come without conflict — and that “nonviolent” does not mean “nonconfrontational.” When Lewis traveled through South Carolina with an integrated busload of Freedom Riders or organized demonstrations in Alabama to demand voting rights, he was challenging authority and defying police. When a group he was leading was given an official order to halt or disperse, he ignored it and pressed on. He regularly violated Jim Crow laws and was arrested some 40 times. More than once, he was beaten within an inch of his life.

He survived to become a senior member of Congress, to be awarded the Medal of Freedom by the nation’s first African American president and to be considered a national hero. None of it ever seemed to go to his head, though. There was too much work still to do.

When Lewis spoke to groups of young people, he often began by telling of his childhood near Troy, Ala. His parents were former sharecroppers who had scraped together enough money to buy their own little spread, and one of his chores was the care and feeding of the family’s chickens. He would take a Bible out to the yard and preach to the poultry, intent on saving their souls. It was a calling that led him to study at a Baptist seminary in Nashville, where he met leaders of the nascent civil rights movement — and found his higher calling.

Lewis would urge young audiences not to follow the rules but to “get in good trouble” by pushing for fairness and justice. “Get in the way,” he would exhort activists who were pushing, often rudely, for positive change. “Keep getting in the way.”

He marveled at the Black Lives Matter protests because of their unprecedented size and diversity. He saw this movement as “so much more massive and all inclusive” than the protests he had led and witnessed in his youth — and allowed himself to hope that this time, there would be “no turning back.”

But Lewis was never under the illusion that the road ahead would be easy. He had lived to see the 1965 Voting Rights Act — whose passage was spurred by the way Lewis and others were brutally attacked on the Selma-to-Montgomery March — have its guts ripped out by a conservative Supreme Court, giving Southern states license to impose new laws designed to limit African American suffrage.

So please, no crocodile tears or soaring words of praise for Lewis from Republicans whose strategy for winning in November is to keep African Americans from voting. If you are trying to take away the rights this great American suffered a fractured skull to win, you don’t really admire him at all. You spit on his legacy and dishonor yourselves.

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Sometimes I wonder if history is trying to tell us something. July 17, for example. In the morning came news of the death of C.T. Vivian. At night, the news that Rep. John R. Lewis (D-Ga.) passed away. Two men linked by decades of struggle, success and the deep truth that struggle itself is a kind of success. They met long ago, in the days of tiny television sets and black ribbon neckties and automobiles with fins stamped from sheet metal.

Around 1960, Vivian and Lewis were students together in Nashville under the tutelage of the Rev. James M. Lawson, one of history’s great apostles of nonviolent political action. Along with Diane Nash, another giant of the campaign for human dignity, they galvanized the Freedom Rides.

Key to Lawson’s greatness was his honesty. He made it fiercely clear to students at his workshops that nonviolent black protest would bring out the worst of the Deep South. They would be attacked for sitting down, beaten for marching, murdered for registering black voters. The road to change passed through pain and even martyrdom.

Lewis and Vivian graduated from Lawson’s school on different, complementary paths. Vivian became one of the great preachers of his — or any — generation, his oratory greatly admired by no less an authority than the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. Vivian’s nonviolent protests landed him in the hellhole of Mississippi’s Parchman Farm, the ghastly state prison from which he emerged with his vast dignity and integrity entirely intact.

Lewis’s eloquence was more physical, more visceral. He left the Nashville training ready to die for civil rights. Not in some theoretical sense: ready to die today, die tomorrow, die next week — whenever his sacrifice was needed to advance the causes of freedom and love.

In Alabama, Lewis was beaten nearly to death at a Montgomery bus station, smashed in the head with a wooden Coca-Cola crate. He was beaten nearly to death on a bridge in Selma. The world saw his grandeur on the evening news. His self-possessed suffering made fools and monsters of his foes.

Later in life, as a member of Congress from Georgia, Lewis proudly wore a starkly bald head that compelled respect like a carved idol. The bones of his skull were on frank display. Which ones took the brunt of that crate swung ferociously at the bus station in Montgomery? Where did the club land that knocked him unconscious as he marched with King in Selma across the Edmund Pettus Bridge?

Over the years, in Washington and elsewhere, I’ll admit I studied that battered skull. Notebook in hand, I couldn’t look at Lewis without imagining the pain. When I finally had the chance, I asked him how he steeled himself for such suffering — “How do you prepare mentally and spiritually to be nonviolent in response to what you...”
know is going to be a violent attack?”

Lewis replied in the simple, gentle — always authoritative — tones that were his hallmark. His voice, as old and soft as pine duff, invited agreement, and made it impossible to disagree in good faith.

“You studied the way of love. You studied the way of peace,” he answered. “You studied the philosophy and the discipline of nonviolence. We had been taught” — by Lawson and King and by each other in the school of nonviolence — “never to hate or become bitter, never to lose the sense of hope. And in the process, you may get arrested a few times. You may be beaten and left bloody, left unconscious. In Montgomery, I was hit in the head with a wooden crate, and in Selma, I had a concussion on that bridge. I saw death: I thought I was going to die.

“But you keep going. You see something that is so necessary, so right. And I say to my colleagues sometimes, and to friends in my district, and to brothers and sisters in the movement, that you have to be hopeful, you have to be optimistic, be hopeful, keep going!

“Don’t get lost in a sea of despair.”

Sometimes history tries to send us a message. And this unsettling, turbulent period of ours seems to invite an intervention. Maybe history is saying this: Two of our best, two giants, two heroes, two voices, two glories of peaceful persuasion, of victory without violence, have left the stage arm-in-arm, fists raised in triumph. Take their message to heart. Ours is not the first discouraging moment. Can we resolve, like them, not to falter into despair?

David Von Drehle writes a twice-weekly column for The Post. He was previously an editor-at-large for Time Magazine, and is the author of four books, including “Rise to Greatness: Abraham Lincoln and America’s Most Perilous Year” and “Triangle: The Fire That Changed America.”

Questions for your consideration

1. David Von Drehle begins this column with historic perspective on civil rights and background of Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.).
   A. Who are Rev. James M. Lawson, Diane Nash and C.T. Vivian?
   B. What were the Freedom Rides?

2. As a young man and leader, Lewis would tell students in his workshops that the “road to change passed through pain and even martyrdom.” Give two examples of the truth as it applied to nonviolent black protest.

3. Von Drehle shifts to the first person and the stories Lewis’s skull told.
   What does this perspective add to the reflective column?

4. Read Lewis’s response to Von Drehle’s question.
   A. What is the main idea that Lewis presents?
   B. What do you think of this approach to life and attacks because of one’s beliefs?

5. Von Drehle ends with a reference: “Ours is not the first discouraging moment.”
   A. To what do you think he is referring?
   B. What aspects of contemporary life might you find discouraging or cause you to feel despair? How do you respond?
From Sit-ins to the Streets

From the Boston Tea Party to sit-ins at lunch counters, from Freedom Bus rides to marches of thousands, protest is engrained in American democracy. In the First Amendment we are guaranteed that Congress shall make no law to abridge “the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Signers of the Declaration of Independence knew what it was like to have King George III repeatedly ignore their petitions of wrong doing against them. Legislatures in Revolutionary times considered petitions from eligible voters, women, slaves and aliens.

Review the list of examples of the many marches that have been held in more recent years — assembling and letting the government know of their concerns and the infringement of their rights. Select one of these or another of your choice. Read further and be able to answer these questions:

- Where, when and who participated? Include estimated crowd size.
- Why did it take place?
- Did any action follow the march?
- Does the issue or concern resolved or does it continue to get attention?

1917: Silent Protest Parade
1963: March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom
1969: Anti-Vietnam War Protests
1981: Solidarity Day
1982: Anti-Nuclear March
1995: Million Man March
1997: Million Woman March
2014: People’s Climate March
2017: The Women’s March
2018: March for Our Lives
2020: Black Lives Matter

1962: Two Nashville police officers carry John Lewis away after he failed to obey orders to move away from Herschel’s Tic Toc restaurant during a sit-in protest.

1965: An Alabama state trooper swings a billy club at John Lewis on March 7, in Selma. Lewis sustained a fractured skull.

2017: With the Capitol in the background, a crowd fills the streets of D.C. during the Women’s March on Jan. 21.

At 88, A Slave’s Son
He’s heard his dad’s stories of the lynching tree, witnessed history from Selma to Black Lives Matter Plaza

by Sydney Trent

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The whipping post. The lynching tree. They were the stories of slavery, an inheritance of fear and dread, passed down from father to son.

The boy, barely 5, would listen, awed, as his father spoke of life in Virginia, where he had been born into bondage on a plantation during the Civil War and suffered as a child laborer afterward.

As unlikely as it might seem, that boy, Daniel Smith, is still alive at 88, a member of an almost vanished demographic: The child of someone once considered a piece of property instead of a human being.

Long after leaving Massies Mill, Va., and moving up North as a young man in his 20s, Smith’s father, Abram Smith, married a woman who was decades younger and fathered six children. Dan, the fifth, was born in 1932 when Abram was 70. Only one sibling besides Dan — Abe, 92 — is still alive.

It’s not possible to know how many people alive today are the children of enslaved people, but we shouldn’t be so surprised that they still exist because the generations...
since slavery can be counted on one hand, said Hilary Green, an associate professor of history at the University of Alabama. “We don’t want to talk about it because we as Americans … we’re always forward thinking. We never think enough about the past.”

The American tendency toward selective memory applies doubly so to slavery, Green said. “How do you remember this violent period in history, the owning of people? It does not fit our narrative that we tell about ourselves. … We ratify the myth rather than deal with the truth.”

After his father died in 1938, Dan Smith picked up where Abram’s life left off, witnessing decades of the nation’s racial history — the injustice of Jim Crow, the grief and glory of the civil rights movement, the elections of the first black president and then Donald Trump, and the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. He watched the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis caught on cellphone video, horrified, and wonders where this new unrest will lead.

All along, Smith created his own history — as a medic in the Korean War and a hometown hero who rescued a man from a flood. He’s been chased on a dark road by white supremacists in Alabama as a foot soldier in the fight for civil rights. Smith was there when a young firebrand named John Lewis roused the crowd at the March on Washington, and he linked arms with the young man roused the crowd at the March on Washington, and he linked arms with the young man who was black, raised their two children in Bethesda, Md., while he pursued his career as a federal worker promoting health and education and fighting poverty. He retired in 1994 and in 2006 wed his second wife, Loretta Neumann, who is white, at the National Cathedral, where as head usher he escorted presidents.

Dan Smith’s father, Abram, year unknown.

What does it mean to Smith to be the living son of an enslaved person in the 21st century? “Quite frankly, I’ve just grown up and been busy, and I’ve never thought much about it,” Smith said.

A courtly man with pecan-colored skin wearing a perfectly pressed blue and white striped collared shirt and khakis, Smith shared his life story from the wide front porch of his home in Northwest Washington on a sweltering July day. Cars rushed by as Neumann leaned in at his side to listen.

Yet when he thinks about it in this moment, time feels elastic. The 157 years since his father’s birth had once seemed like “a solid gap,” but now the time strikes him as distressingly brief. With Trump as president, the years feel to Smith like an accordion — the decades folding, folding — back toward slavery “almost to the point where it could happen again.”

And with a mountaintop view in his ninth decade of life, Smith can also see clearly the valleys and hills — how his father was shaped by slavery and racism and was able to push ahead despite it, and how Abram Smith did the best he knew how to prepare his children for life.

‘A.B. Smith’s children’

Abram Smith did not rise far from his beginnings, working as a janitor in a factory, and yet he extolled America and was invested deeply in its promise of opportunity for all.

“I remember my father and mother saying ‘It’s a free country. You can do anything you want, you can be anything you want,’ and they believed it,” Smith said.

Abram Smith spent time in Philadelphia and Poughkeepsie, N.Y., before settling in the early 1920s in the small, very white city of Winsted, Conn., where he lived with his second wife, Clara Wheeler, who was decades his junior. He was known in the community as “A.B. Smith,” and he made sure his four daughters and two sons knew what it meant to be his children.

“A lot of black children grew up in a world where they didn’t know who they were and where they came from,” Dan Smith said, “but we were A.B. Smith’s children, and that sustained us through anything.”

A.B. Smith’s children were the hardest workers, had the best manners and were the brightest, too. When the offspring asked why they were so superior, their parents replied: “Because you are the children of A.B. Smith.” They were forbidden to play with some poor black children in town, although his father cleaned a factory for a few dollars a day. “We were poor as church mice, but we were better because my father said we were better,” Dan Smith said.

Looking back, he can now see his parents as followers of the “twice as good” philosophy — the futile belief that black people must perform twice as well as whites just to be considered equal. And beneath the sunny message of how extraordinary the Smith children were lay Abram Smith’s stories of slavery with their frightening symbols of brutality.
There was the whipping post in the middle of the plantation where enslaved people were tied up and beaten.

There was the lynch tree. Two enslaved people in chains had run away together, and rumors held that they had been hanged there. Later, when Dan Smith wanted to date white girls, his mother would warn: “I don’t want to have to cut you down.”

There was the wagon wheel. The enslaver accused a man on the plantation of an unspecified offense, and the man denied it. “The owner said, ‘You’re lying to me,’ and had the man and his whole family line up in the winter in front of a wooden wagon wheel,” Smith recounted. The enslaver ordered the man to kneel and lick the wheel’s metal rim. His tongue froze there until the desperate man pulled part of it away.

Smith and his siblings listened quietly, aware any questions about their father’s past could be met with a strike to the face. Years later, he thinks his father was loath to relive the trauma and ashamed of his roots as an enslaved person. (It is unclear whether his work on the plantation ended with the war. The 1870 census listed Abram Smith as “a boy laborer,” and many newly freed slaves, with nowhere to go, remained where they were, mistreated, Green said.) “We just listened, and whatever came out of his mouth, that’s what we heard,” Dan Smith said.

After high school, he set out into the world with a belief in America and his own exceptionalism instilled in him by his father.

‘That will not happen to me’

Smith joined the Army, serving as a medic during the Korean War. In the summer of 1955, he was back in Winsted after Hurricane Diane when the Mad River breached its banks. Eighty-seven people died in the flood that day, but one was saved when Smith stripped down to his shorts and rescued a truck driver named Joe Horte. Smith is not the bragging sort, and his bravery might have gone unheralded if “Hiroshima” author John Hersey didn’t mention him by name in the New Yorker under the sub-headline “Negro Youth a Hero.”

It was a subsequent act of heroism, though, that showed Smith exactly what it meant to be a black man in America — so far from his father’s ideal. At this point, he looked up from his mask and paused, saying quietly: “I hope I don’t get too emotional.”

In about 1957, he was working as a trip director for Camp Jewell, a YMCA camp in nearby Colebrook, Conn., when he brought his group of teenagers back from a week at a lake to show them a reservoir where he used to swim. Upon their arrival, he spotted a commotion — a young woman had fallen into the quarry. Smith rushed down to help.

The woman had been hoisted onto dry land, and he bent over to check her pulse: still beating. He had leaned over to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation when a police officer yelled down: “Hey, you, you, YOU. She’s already dead. She’s already dead.”

At first, he didn’t know what the cop meant — Smith knew she was alive — but suddenly it dawned, and he backed away. “He didn’t want me to put my lips on her, and she died,” he said, still angry and “sick” about what happened.

That year, he realized that his parents had been sold a bill of goods about America as the land of the free: “We were all brainwashed. … Everyone in America fell for it.”

The truth was underscored when his older brother, Abe, signed a contract to buy his mother a house. He told Clara Smith, whose eyes filled with tears, that it was the white house up on the corner. Clara looked at her son and lit in. “You know that house is too good for me,” she said. “It’s better than the house of the white woman I work for.”

Perhaps it was the fact that he was A.B. Smith’s son, or maybe it was just him, but “I said to myself, ‘That will not happen to me,’ ” Smith said. “When I want something, I’m going to get it.”

By that time, the civil rights movement had begun. In August 1955, Emmett Till was lynched in Mississippi, and in December, after Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat for a white passenger, the Montgomery bus boycott was launched, led by a young pastor named Martin Luther King Jr.

Smith graduated from Springfield College in 1960 and worked as a social worker for three years. He and a white colleague in 1963 drove down from Massachusetts to be part of the March on Washington. Smith had been admitted into the veterinary program at the Tuskegee Institute but felt inspired to join the movement.

He was heading up an antipoverty program in Lowndes County, Ala., when the church office where Smith worked was burned to the ground. Not long after, Smith noticed he was being tailed on a dark country road. As he whizzed ahead, he heard his white pursuers yell, “Pull over, black coon!”

He thinks now about what might have happened had he not sped into a lit service station. Back then, there were no cellphones with video cameras to capture racism and no social media on which to share it. This was on his mind as he drove himself down 16th Street in his red Volvo this summer, taking in the protests over Floyd’s killing as Neumann waved a sign outside reading “Black and White Lives Together.”

He felt inspired by what he was Witnessing. Streams of people of all races moved toward Black Lives Matter Plaza, led by the youth of a brand new era. And for a fleeting moment, as the crowds agitated for racial justice, Smith felt time unfolding.