

Rep. John Lewis
Boston University
Commencement Address
May 20, 2018

President Brown, members of the Board of Trustees, distinguished faculty and guests, excellent administrators and staff, proud parents, family, students and friends, I am pleased and delighted to be with you on this very important occasion. To each and every one of you receiving a diploma today---- congratulations.

Because you have completed this assignment in your life, you can now recognize the value of dreaming dreams and making them a reality. This is a great day. This is your day.

Enjoy it! Take a long, deep breath and take it all in. But tomorrow you must be prepared to roll up your sleeves, because the world is waiting for talented men and women to lead it to a better place.

The world is waiting for you, for your leadership, for your vision to help build an all-inclusive world community based on simple justice that values the dignity and the worth of every human being----what I like to call the Beloved Community.

Consider those two words: Beloved Community. “Beloved” means not hateful, not violent, not uncaring, not unkind. And “Community” means not separated, not polarized, not locked in struggle.

The most pressing challenge in our society today is defined by the methods we use to defend the dignity of humankind. But too often we are focused on accumulating

the trappings of a comfortable life—the big house, designer clothes, and a shiny, new car.

But I say to you today, if you want a better, more just society, you cannot wait for someone else to do it. Through your own efforts, through your own actions, through your own creativity and vision, you have to do it. You must make our world a better place.

If it hadn't been for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. a graduate of this university, I don't know what would have happened to many of us. He helped us find a way to get in the way. I remember writing a letter to Dr. King when I was 17 years old.

I wanted to attend a little college near my home, call Troy State College. I applied to the college, but I never heard from them, so I enrolled in American Baptist College in Nashville instead. While I was at school there as a freshman, I told one of my professors about my application to Troy State. He suggested I write Martin Luther King Jr.

I was only 17 years old, but I wrote him a letter, and he wrote me back. He told me to come visit him when I had a break.

So when I was home for the summer, he sent me a Greyhound Bus ticket to meet him in Montgomery. When I got off the bus, there to meet me was a man who became a legend in the struggle for social justice in America. He was the first lawyer I ever met, a man named Fred Gray, who was the lawyer for Rosa Parks and for Dr. King.

He drove me to First Baptist Church, pastored by Rev. Ralph Abernathy. When I entered the sanctuary, there was Dr. King and Rev. Abernathy standing at the end of the aisle.

I was so scared. Dr. King said to me, "Are you the boy from Troy? Are you John Lewis". I was so scared I said my whole name, "Yes," I said, "Dr. King, I am John Robert Lewis." And that was the beginning of a long friendship.

He became a leader of leaders. He became an inspiration. He led us. He inspired us to be better, to fight against racial discrimination, to speak up against violence and war. He taught us the way of love, the way of peace, the philosophy and the discipline of non-violence.

He had unbelievable teachers and professors here at Boston University. He loved the days and the time he spent here. He fell in love with Coretta Scott King here, and they became a duo. And with her permission, they went back to the South, and with her help and support, he helped inspire a revolution of values and revolution of ideas that transformed this nation.

I grew up on a farm in rural Alabama outside a little town called Troy. When I was young I used to ask a lot of questions.

Sometimes my parents would say, I wanted to know too much. But I saw those signs that said WHITE MEN, COLORED MEN, WHITE WOMEN, COLORED WOMEN, WHITE WAITING, AND COLORED WAITING.

I used to ask my mother, my father, and my grandparents, my great

grandparents, “Why?” and they would say, “That’s the way it is. Don’t get in trouble. Don’t get in the way.” But one day I heard the voice of Martin Luther King Jr. on an old radio, and it sounded like he was talking directly to me.

He talked about another generation of students, another generation of young people, who decided to boycott segregated public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama.

He talked about people just like you and me, ordinary people with extraordinary vision who decided to stand up for what they believed.

At that moment, I knew that I could strike a blow against segregation and racial discrimination. I decided to get in the way. I decided to get in trouble.

But it was good trouble, it was necessary trouble.

If you had told me 50 years ago that I would be standing here today, I would say you’re crazy, you’re out of your mind, you don’t know what you’re talking about. It was ordinary people and gifted leaders like Dr. King, who made that possible.

We really believed that if we practiced the discipline of non-violence, not just as an idea, but as a way of life, that we could change things in America.

We really believed that we were building the Beloved Community. And through our action, we brought about a non-violent revolution under the rule of law, a revolution of values, a revolution of ideas.

All across America the signs that said WHITE and COLORED came down. Today

you will not see them, unless you visit a museum or look at pictures in a book. We have come a long way, but we still have a great distance to go before we lay down the burden of hatred, of violence, of race and class.

There is still a need to change the social, economic, political, and religious structures around us. There is still a need to build the Beloved Community.

For those of us in the Movement, we learned early that our struggle was not for a month, a season, or a year, but the struggle of a lifetime. That is what it takes to build the “Beloved Community.”

As leaders of the 21st Century, you can move our society forward by standing up for what you deeply believe. Whatever it is that you care about—whether it is immigration reform, environmental justice, making this world a little cleaner and a little greener, state sponsored violence and brutality, or making sure all Americans can register and vote ----whatever it is you care about, you must find your passion and make your contribution.

You must be maladjusted to the problems and conditions of today.

You have to get off the sidelines and get in the way. You just have to get in the way and make your voice heard. You have an obligation, a mission and a mandate to do your part.

The journey through life is difficult, but it is more meaningful when it is fueled by

a vision, a dream, a determination to make life better for someone other than yourself. As graduates of Boston University, I know you will do well. But you must also do good.

You have the power to lead; the power to change the social, economic and political structures around you. And if you use all your power to love and not to hate, to build and not to tear down, to heal and not to kill, then we can once again create a non-violent revolution of values, a revolution of ideas in America and around the world.

And if you continue to pursue that standard of excellence in your daily lives, then a new and better world ---a Beloved Community----is yours to build. With faith, hope and love---peace be with you. I wish you well. Thank you.