

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 21

John Lewis-In Memoriam

I'm writing this chronicle in the final days of December 2020. It is often customary at this time of year to reflect on the events of the past year and on the people who have played a significant role.

The year itself will be remembered as the year of the Covid-19 pandemic. And the individual who stands out for me and whom I wish to honour is John Lewis.

John Lewis, who died a few weeks ago, served seven terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. He became famous before that for his action on "Bloody Sunday", March 7, 1965 in Selma, Alabama. At the age of twenty-five Lewis led six hundred marchers across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in a peaceful demonstration against racial segregation,

They were met by a large group of state troopers who attacked them with clubs. The marchers were beaten and fifty of them, including Lewis, were hospitalized. He sustained a fractured skull which left a mark on his head for the rest of his life.

Lewis who went on to enter politics, was to call this event and many other similar events in his efforts to end racial segregation "Good Trouble."

Why does Lewis appeal to me in a chronicle on climate change? It is because he was able to combine knowledge with action. He was a systems thinker. He knew what the American system with its long history of discrimination was doing to his people. . But knowledge was not enough. It had to be translated into action. He was jailed more than thirty times for his 'good troubles' against racially discriminating systems. But how did he do this without becoming hardened and bitter? He explained his approach in a book he wrote with Brenda Jones.

“You are a light. You are the light. Never let anyone—any person or any force—dampen, dim or diminish your light. Study the path of others to make your way easier and more abundant. Lean toward the whispers of your own heart, discover the universal truth, and follow its dictates. [...] Release the need to hate, to harbor division, and the enticement of revenge. Release all bitterness. Hold only love, only peace in your heart, knowing that the battle of good to overcome evil is already won. Choose confrontation wisely, but when it is your time don't be afraid to stand up, speak up, and speak out against injustice. And if you follow your truth down the road to peace and the affirmation of love, if you shine like a beacon for all to see, then the poetry of all the great dreamers and philosophers is yours to manifest in a nation, a world community, and a Beloved Community that is finally at peace with itself.”

— John Lewis with Brenda Jones- Across That Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America (Hachette books 2017, p. 208)

May we learn from John Lewis how to patiently strive to change the systems that are damaging our Earth. May we also learn how to create new systems that foster a mutually enhancing relationship with our species and Earth.

And in this New Year of 2021 may we get involved in lots of good trouble—standing up for what is right in a climate changing world. May we do it in a manner that releases all bitterness and leaves love and peace in its place.

Mike Bell, Comox Valley Climate Change Network.