

Good Trouble

The Story of John Lewis

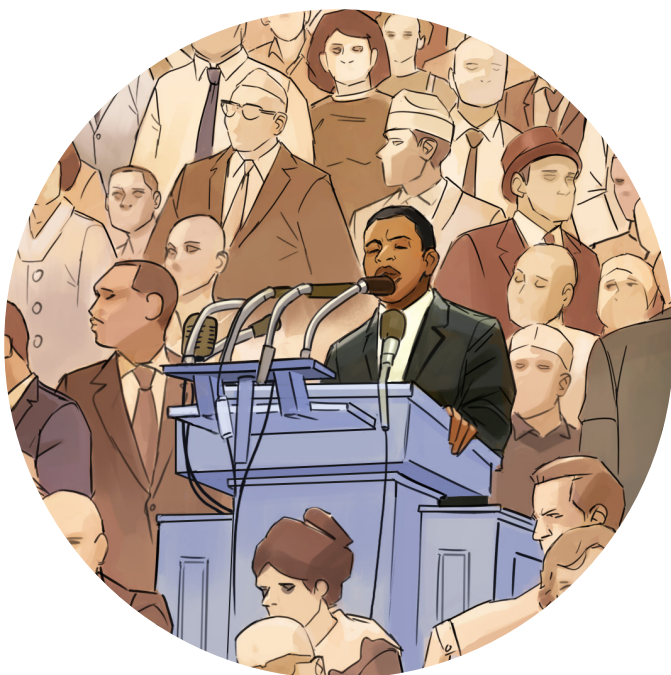


Written by **Elizabeth Gray**
Illustrated by **Raymond Sébastien**

Upper Elementary

Good Trouble

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1957

Scratch! Scratch!

John's pencil dashed across his paper. "Dear, Dr. King. . ." John had just listened to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr's speech on the radio. He felt hopeful after hearing Dr. King's words. When Dr. King spoke, power and peace perfectly combined within every phrase. The words from his Montgomery Bus Boycott Speech echoed in John's mind.

"There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing amid the piercing chill of an alpine November."

Dr. King was a civil rights leader. This meant he fought for equality for all people. His message was one of love, and he found nonviolent ways to work toward a better

nation. He called this dream of a better nation the beloved community.

That was exactly what John wanted. He wanted better for himself. He wanted better for his family. He wanted better for people of color. He wanted better for all people. He knew Dr. King would be the best person to reach out to for help.

John wrote quickly, hoping to finish the letter before his family could find out. “I want to attend a little *White-only* college 10 miles from my home, Troy State College.”

It had been quite some time since John first applied. Yet, he hadn’t heard back. Though it was warm outside, John felt the chill of November that Dr. King spoke about. He had experienced this type of silence before. It was the type of silence

that spoke volumes. It was a silence that yelled, “You’re invisible!” It was a silence that shouted, “We don’t want your kind!” It was a silence that hollered, “Denied!”

When John was young, he asked his family about the signs posted throughout town. Those signs spoke even louder than silence. *White Men, Colored Men. White Women, Colored Women. White Waiting, Colored Waiting.* When he asked about these signs, his family’s response was always the



same, “It’s just the way it is. Don’t go getting into trouble!” John knew it was the way it was, but he didn’t think it was the way it should be!

It wasn’t trouble he wanted. It was change.

It wasn’t trouble he wanted. It was equal opportunity.

It wasn’t trouble he wanted. It was basic human rights.

John didn’t want to tiptoe his way through life. The laws in place put his hopes



and dreams on the other side of trouble, and he wasn't afraid to cross that line to get to them. "If trouble is what it takes," he thought, "it may be worth getting into trouble sometimes—necessary trouble—to make things right."

Scratch! Scratch!

John began to sign his name,
"John Lewis."

Even through the radio, John felt a connection with Dr. King. Dr. King's words spoke not just to John's ears, not just to his mind, but to his heart. His words echoed the voice John heard on the inside—the voice that spoke what was right or wrong. Dr. King's voice spoke the same message that John's conscience did.



Dear Dr. King,
I need your help.
I want to go to a small
White Only College
just 10 miles
away

When signs said he wasn't allowed or welcomed because of the color of his skin, John knew it just wasn't right. When his family told him to accept things the way they were, he knew it just wasn't right. John's conscience was like a light on the inside, fueled by his values and pointing him in the right direction.

John ripped open the envelope and read Dr. King's response through the sound of his heartbeat. He had waited for this letter to arrive! "Come and see me in Montgomery," John read with his eyes widening. Not only did Dr. King write him back and ask him to come, he also sent John a bus ticket.

1958

Thump! Thump!

John's heart beat as he approached the door of the church. "Are you John Lewis? Are you the boy from Troy?" asked Dr. King. John couldn't believe he was standing in front of his hero.

"Yes, I'm John Robert Lewis," he responded. Dr. King agreed to help John under one condition. Dr. King had worked with and led many individuals, groups, and organizations in the fight for equal rights. He knew the challenge John and his family could face if they pressed for his acceptance into an all-White school.

"Get permission from your parents. Tell your parents that they could lose their land or their home could be burned or

bombed. And if they are willing to take that risk, we will file a lawsuit to fight for your acceptance,” Dr. King explained.

Vroom! Vroom!

The bus wheels turned as John headed back to an all-Black university in Nashville, Tennessee. He had counted the cost, and it was too high. His family’s safety was too great a risk. John was willing to sacrifice, but he knew that choice would affect his family. This time, the trouble wasn’t necessary.

John would be patient. He would settle for a school he was allowed to go to, and he would make the most of the opportunity! He knew the road to equality would be a long one, and he was going to prepare himself for it.

1959

Rustle! Rustle!

John turned the pages of the comic book *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*. Like a sponge, he soaked up the information inside.

He read about nonviolent protests, civil disobedience, peaceful protests, boycotts, and sit-ins. He looked at comic drawings of Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi.

John now understood that Rosa Parks's refusal to get up was civil disobedience. She broke the law to inspire a



change in the law. She peacefully fought using her actions, which led to other people joining her! The result was a change in Montgomery's segregated bus laws.

As John kept reading and as his relationship with Dr. King grew, so did his understanding of nonviolent activism. Nonviolent activists believed in the power of strategy, unity, peace, and love—even when they weren't shown those things in return. John learned how to use his rights to fight for what was right.

After learning more about Dr. King's and Rosa Parks's efforts, John felt inspired to find a way to get in the way—to get into good trouble, necessary trouble.

1960

Screech! Screech!

The brakes of the bus screeched to a halt. John, the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, sat on a bus filled with Black and White activists called Freedom Riders. Their trip to South Carolina was planned, and a *White-only* waiting sign hung in front of their stop. In just a few moments, these Freedom Riders would exit the bus and enter an area where they clearly were not welcome.

White, Black, male, female, the Freedom Riders had the same goal: nonviolent protest. They had trained for this moment. Don't hit back. Don't spit back. Don't yell back. Sing, pray, stand, be still, or be silent—just don't react.



John knew that fists and insults would be hurled in his direction. But he also knew that like a light in the dark, their silent presence would shine brighter than the hate and violence around them.

This was risky business, but it was an opportunity to do their part to change segregation laws. And they did just that! Over and over again, at restaurants, bus stations, and restrooms—although harmed,

arrested, and eventually released—they found a way to get in the way.

John's goal was never to break the law. His hope was to change the law. Sometimes that meant getting into good trouble, necessary trouble to make things right. Change was the goal, and until change came about, John was committed to his goal—no matter the price!

1961

Flick! Flick!

Camera lights flashed in John's eyes. This wasn't a photo people usually smiled for. Hours earlier, John and others carried out their plan. They walked right past the sign that read *White Men* and straight into the restroom. Though the law said John was wrong, he knew it was the law that was actually wrong!

Now, like many times before, John stood in a county jail. "Turn!" the officer yelled, and John did just that. He turned and smirked at the camera right before it flashed. Brighter than the flash of the camera was the light of hope and truth John carried inside. This photo was meant to bring shame, but John

felt proud. This photo showed him standing up for the rights of all people.

With each protest and march, John counted the cost. He knew that sometimes there would be a price for doing what was right, but he knew that it was well worth it! John believed that when he saw something that was not right, not fair, not just, he had to do something about it.

After that photo, John spent months in jail, crammed alongside other activists. Though at times they felt weary and afraid, they stood firm. These testing moments would teach John lessons that later in life he would teach others. John's light would be tested, but he could never let any person or force dim or dampen it.

28 AUGUST 1963

Roar! Roar!

The boy from Troy was now the young man from Troy. At 23 years old, John stood on stage next to his hero, Dr. King, and the other civil rights leaders who inspired him. When John was a boy, he'd practice preaching to the chickens on his family farm as he flung the feed in their direction.

John, the youngest speaker during the March on Washington, spoke to a crowd larger than he could have ever imagined. From where he stood, the people looked like the tiny specks of chicken feed he used to fling. John carefully crafted and flung his words with power and passion.

“We do not want our freedom gradually, but we want to be free now! We are tired.



We are tired of being beaten by policemen. We are tired of seeing our people locked up in jail over and over again. We do not want to go to jail. But we will go to jail if this is the price we must pay for love, brotherhood, and true peace.” John’s words were like fiery arrows that pierced the hearts of those who listened.

“We must say: Wake up, America! Wake up! For we cannot stop, and we will not and cannot be patient.” His words were a wake-up call to everyone who lived comfortably while those who looked like him struggled. His words roused people from their slumber. Shortly after John finished, Dr. King stood before the crowd and declared, “I have a dream.”

7 MARCH 1965

Pitter-Patter! Pitter-Patter!

John's feet led the way, and nearly 600 people followed behind as he marched across a bridge in Selma, Alabama. They were many in number and united in one cause: voting rights.

John and other activists wanted to bring attention to the voting barriers that Black Americans faced. John knew that the power to vote was a nonviolent tool that Black Americans needed to change the laws that made life so difficult for them.

The activists marched and sang together. As they got closer to the end of the bridge, their songs were interrupted. "Turn around!" echoed the police chief's bullhorn. With no weapon in his hands and no hate in



his heart, John continued to march in the direction he wanted the country to go: forward. They had a message to spread, and they would not be silenced.

The sea of uniforms charged toward them. Their peace and prayers were met with violence. That day they got in trouble, necessary trouble, but it wasn't without a price.

Reporters' cameras flashed around John, but this time he wasn't smiling. He was badly injured. Although John's body was bruised and beaten, his spirit was hopeful and strong!

Gasp! Gasp!

Around the country, people watched their televisions in shock. Their hearts sank

and their jaws dropped when they saw the photos of how poorly John and the other marchers had been treated. That day became known as “Bloody Sunday,” a day John would never forget. The nation was shocked, and support for voting rights grew.

Similar to Rosa Parks, John had gotten into good trouble, necessary trouble! His sacrifice brought attention to the issue he marched to support. Just like Rosa Parks’s actions sparked a change in segregated bus laws, John’s actions sparked a change in voting rights for Black Americans! Shortly after the incident, the Voting Rights Act was passed.

1971

“Vote! Vote!”

Bloody Sunday flung the door of democracy open wider. Now, John needed people to march right through it.

Some of the obstacles that hindered people of color from voting were removed. However, the lurking shadows of fear and distrust remained. “Voting is the most powerful nonviolent tool we have,” John



thought. He needed people to take hold of that tool.

John became the leader of the Voter Education Project. He and his team worked to encourage people to vote. By the end of his time serving as director, nearly four million people of color had registered to vote.

1981

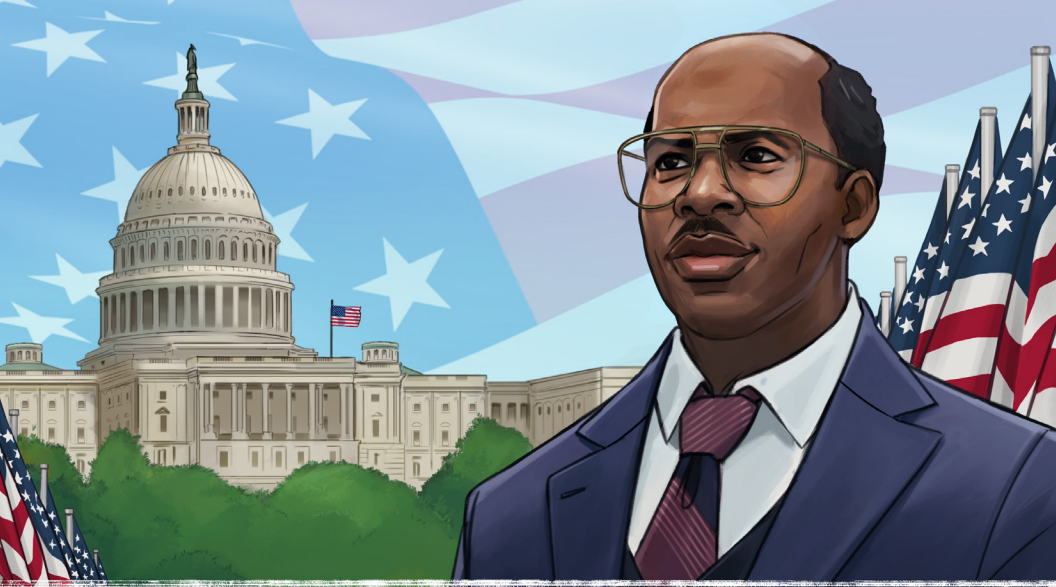
Thump! Thump!

John continued to march to the beat of his own drum. He fought for what was best for the collective instead of just some. In 1981, John became a councilman in Atlanta, Georgia. Now, as a local politician, he was one step closer to creating a beloved community, a place where the worth of every person was recognized.



John knew he was elected by the people, for the people. When the voices of other politicians became too loud, John

leaned into the whisper of his heart. “Take the position that is good for the entire city, not just a segment of it,” he encouraged. John’s light continued to shine bright for his city.



1986

Tick! Tick!

“Change often takes time. It rarely happens all at once,” John thought. John spent his whole life fighting for equality. Finally, the boy from Troy who was put behind bars would now change laws like the unjust ones that had put him in jail.

John spent his life listening to his inner voice that spoke to what was right or wrong. Now, as a Congressman, John became that

voice for other lawmakers. As the conscience of Congress, he pushed for laws that would improve the lives of all people.

Sometimes he got into good trouble, necessary trouble, in order to do so. John's position changed, but his message remained the same.

2011

Cheer! Cheer!

Throughout John's life, his conscience was a guiding light. He lived by his own words: "When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something."

John never said or did things for applause, but in 2011 he received a standing ovation. John was awarded one of the greatest honors of his nation. President Barack Obama placed the Presidential Medal of Freedom around John Lewis's neck.



“Generations from now, when parents teach their children what is meant by courage, the story of John Lewis will come to mind—an American who knew that change could not wait for some other person or some other time; whose life is a lesson in the fierce urgency of now.”

The red, white, blue, and gold medal glistened as the cameras flashed. As the President spoke, John’s lips curved into a smile that resembled the smirk in his mugshot. John smiled now as he smiled then, proud to know he had spoken up and acted on what he believed in throughout his life.

Now the world knew what John always knew: sometimes getting into trouble, good trouble, is necessary to make things right.



Elizabeth Gray is the author of *Good Trouble: The Story of John Lewis*. She and her husband live outside of Washington, D.C. They are both writers, dreamers, and creators. Together they have 12 nieces, 4 nephews, 8 godchildren, and over 500 students they hold near to their hearts. Each book she writes is a seed of inspiration she hopes to plant.



Raymond Sébastien is a French artist based in Paris. He has worked in the video game industry for eight years. His graphic style is inspired by Afro, pop, and fashion culture—all bathed in the warm and shimmering colors of his native island Martinique. Since his childhood, he has always been fascinated by creating an original and colorful universe.

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