Marsh, Charles
Interview with Congressman John Lewis

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Charles Marsh, Congressional Office
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Part I

Marsh: You grew up outside of Troy, Alabama?

Lewis: Outside about ten, twelve miles, if you come one way toward Banks…

Marsh: Might I ask you just for a kind of general description of the religious environment of your childhood?

Lewis: Well, I grew up in a very large family and were expected to go to Sunday school every Sunday. I must say I grew up in what I would consider a very religious household, a religious family. My father and mother encouraged us to attend church and Sunday School. My grandfather, my mother's father, and his father, my great-grandfather, were very active in the church where we became members. It was the Macedonia Baptist Church. But they only had service there on the third Sunday. A little church, a short distance, less than a 1/4 mile from my house called [Donne Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church], and they had Sunday school there every Sunday, and they also had services on the first Sunday. So, we would go to this church on the first Sunday and attend Sunday school there every Sunday, and then go to our church, the Baptist Church, on the third Sunday. And sometimes, on the second or the fourth Sunday,

we would go to other churches around that area. So, we got, I think, a very religious setting…. It was the place to go, where you met people, it was a fellowship, it was all people to come together at least once a week.

Marsh: I understand that very early you indicated an interest in preaching. I know the story of your early evangelism to chickens. I'm interested to know whether the preaching you heard as a child in the churches engaged the social conditions of your environment and social conditions, which were all too clear, I'm sure, to you, even as a child or whether the preaching did not seem to, at least the preaching of your childhood churches, did not seem to call some of these conditions into question.

Lewis: The preaching that I heard during the early days of my life didn't deal so much with social, political, and economic conditions that existed around rural Alabama. But growing up there, I did from time to time, hear ministers preaching on a local radio station…in Montgomery. It was a black radio station, and it was WRMA, and we could pick it up.

Every Sunday, they would have a guest minister and good music. And you could hear people, a minister preaching. And I remember hearing one…as the guest minister was, and he was talking about Paul…to the church…and he sort of turned it around and talking about…that addressed the church in America today. And then, his sermon on the radio, and he was saying things like, he's not so much concerned…. The black church ministers, of my childhood in rural Alabama, they talked about the over yonder, and the afterlife. But when I heard Dr. King preaching on the radio one Sunday afternoon, I was amazed that he did not talk about the pearly gates and the streets paved with gold. He was concerned about the streets of Montgomery, the highways and byways of America. So, that sort of inspired me.

Marsh: How old were you when you heard this sermon?

Lewis: I guess about 14 or 15, but it didn't I guess register that much with me until the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott [1956] when I was 15 years old. And following the drama of Montgomery…the ministers there had a tremendous impact on me as well.

Marsh: But even before King's sermon, were you troubled by the lack of connection between the gospel that was preached and the racial and economic injustice?

Lewis: Yes, because I thought that it was not in keeping with the teaching of our faith. You read one thing in the Sunday school lesson, and you sing hymns in class.... We talk about one faith, one baptism, one blood and all that. I saw this paradox. I saw this contradiction, and I knew that we had to do something.

Marsh: The lack of connection between the gospel that was preached in the churches and the engagement with social and racial injustice?

Lewis. Well, you saw, in a sense, two worlds, and that was not in keeping with what I considered my religious conviction and my faith. We often would sing the great hymns and read scripture and listen to the great sermons, and at the same time, it was another world where white and blacks just never met, or they met on a different level. And I guess I started to wrestle with that at a very early age.

Marsh: You mention the King sermon you heard on the radio address. To what extent did your seminary education in Nashville inspire your civil rights ministry?

Lewis: When I went to Nashville, it really forced me. It gave strength really. I had some real fights-—not physical—but intellectual debates with some of my schoolmates and classmates because getting there, I became somewhat free and liberated, just being in this environment.

First of all, the little school there, the [Little American Baptist Theological Seminary] had been adjunctly supported and owned by the Southern Baptist Convention and the National Baptist Convention. And at this school, you had white and black professors. You had—it was not any white students, but it gave me an openness to seeing white and black Christians interacting together, working together. It was amazing.

I had this white professor who was I think from Georgia. Or it might have been Alabama, I'm not sure. I think he taught Greek. His name was Joseph Connelly, and he was very committed. From time to time, there were people from the Southern Baptist Life Commission who came to visit.

Marsh: Faith and Life Commission. It was very progressive.

Lewis: I think it was Foy Valentine, who taught for a while at the American Baptist Seminary. Yes, from time to time, we would talk about the social gospel. I learned a lot in seminary especially–how the Bible and theology apply to real life. I liked preaching most of all. We'd have trial sermons. Teachers, students, especially some of my classmates would preach to each other. We'd have trial sermons in the dining room, later after everybody had their meal, during the rest hour, and then we would have a discussion about the sermon; we'd preach everywhere, while we were taking showers as well. But I was soon accused by some of my classmates of preaching too much about the social gospel. That's not what we're supposed to do. We're supposed to save souls and convert people. They said I was preaching too much about MLK, Jr. and reading some of the things that Dr. King had said about…and I guess in his books, *Stride Toward Freedom*, he mentioned, and I started reading different things, and I understood him my freshman year, about the social gospel.

My first year in Nashville when I was 17 years old convinced me more than anything that my religious faith had to be the underpinning for whatever contribution or whatever idea, to create a better society.

Marsh: You're reading the social gospel. I take it the theological identity of the seminary was more evangelical but an evangelical sort of theology that was engaged to social issues. Is that correct?

Lewis: Yes, I think that is quite accurate really. I think that is correct. My seminary emphasis, it was all reaching out. We had courses in mission, went out on soul-saving missions. My first summer, I conducted vacation bible school. I went out into places, and it was sponsored by the Southern Baptist Convention. I went out into west Tennessee, and I was director of vacation bible classes for 2 weeks here and 2 weeks there and…

Marsh: And even in these classes, you were connecting the gospel and reading of the Bible with thinking about your own social location and thinking about your own environment, social and political environment. So, already you were doing that, even in the context of the sort of evangelical…

Lewis: And there were teachers and professors there that were just incredible. At the seminary, there was a black Baptist pastor in Nashville at the First Baptist Church, right in the heart of downtown, who would help us write and think about sermons; I like him because he would take a passage from and develop his thoughts on a text from the Old Testament or the Gospels, and make it intense and relevant to the events of the moment…to contemporary issues.

One Sunday of my first month at seminary, I went to his church and heard him preach a truly great sermon, I can't remember the topic, but it would have been a Biblical exposition that spoke to the times. I listened to the great music of the choir: they would do anthems and do negro spirituals, the great hymns. Before the benediction, he announced that that evening, there would be a social action committee at the church. They would be sponsoring a program on the philosophy of nonviolence. On the philosophy of Christian nonviolence; or…. I attended that workshop, and that was my first step towards getting involved in the movement.

Marsh: You left Nashville. You left seminary before your degree was finished to go on a Freedom Ride.

Lewis: I had almost had my degree. I left just before my degree was conferred on, but I had completed, for the most part, my studies there. I remember my senior sermon was taken from Matthew 10:34, where Jesus the great teacher said, "Think not that I have come to bring peace but a sword."

I've since heard Dr. King talk about a great deal about this passage: that Jesus was not talking about a physical sword but a spiritual sword. But a spiritual sword aimed at creating tension. Not the otherworldly kind. This has been my philosophy and the basis of my involvement in the movement. That in order to bring about change and in order to bring about progress, we must recognize the conflict between the old and the new, what is and what is to come…the forces of darkness and the forces of light, the forces of hate and the forces of God. And that sometimes you have to create this tension. That's what the movement was all about—creating tension through nonviolent means, unsettling the accustomed way with a vision of the new.

Marsh: How then would you describe the theology or spirituality of the civil rights movement?

Lewis: I think if you look at the group of local people, not only Dr. King, you will see that everything was growing out of *religious soil.* Many of us that got caught up in the civil rights movement saw it as an extension of our faith, saw it as part of our religious conviction, part of our very being.

Somehow, in some way, we had been called to be in tune, to live in tune, with what I would call the spirit of God. Some people call it the spirit of history or some supernatural force; but I think many of us felt we were participating with the Creator. That we were in tune with the teachings of the great teacher. That we were trying to live consistently with the teaching of Jesus. When I look back on it, some of the things that we did, and the way we did them, the only way we could have been able to do it was out of deep waters of faith. To go and sit in at a lunch counter, knowing that you'd never done it before, you'd never been in a situation like this before, the possibility that you are going to be beaten, or that a lit cigarette would be put out in your hair or down your back, or someone will hit you, or you will be arrested and jailed, or you could be shot or killed. But you had to go on. I think for many of us, it was like being involved in a holy crusade, and at the same time, be persistently following the path of the great teacher, to be consistent and persistent, knowing that something may happen to us. Knowing that we even may die, but you know, it was the price that you had to pay, and that if we died, that our suffering would be redemption.
The movement was a process, an unstoppable overflowing event. Some folks might want to call this the spirit of history or some other force, but I believe the movement happened because we were in step with the Creator.

Marsh: One of the things that has always amazed me about your witness in the movement is your resoluteness to face possible violent retaliation. There has always seemed to me resoluteness and spontaneity in your witness, and I don't know if anyone has ever commented on that, and it could very well be a part of this spiritual courage, an outgrowth of that. Do you understand my point?

Lewis: I understand what you are saying.

Marsh: Might you give me a sense of why and how that was the case for you personally?

Lewis: The only thing I can say…is really believe this; that you sort of inevitably have to turn yourself over and follow. You just have to follow and be consistent and do the work. And in turning yourself over, you

believe somehow, in some way, things are going to be alright. It will work out as it should. I made up my mind about a few simple things. "Don't be bitter." "You are not hostile." "You do not hate." Because the movement was based on the simple teaching of the great teacher, who said, "Love thy neighbor as thyself." I think this is the strongest point and most powerful component of the Christian faith—and it's the most powerful element within the philosophy of nonviolence. Which is why I believe that the teaching and philosophy of nonviolence is inseparable from the Christian faith. It is the heart of it. It is love in action. You know, you grow up being taught in Sunday school about the love of God, you hear the minister preaching, saying that if you believe in these things, then your hands, your feet must become the hands and the feet of other men. The civil rights movement put the lessons of the church to the test. I heard the call: "You must step out on faith and do the work if you're going to be followers."

Marsh: Bob Moses said in early 1964, "This is Mississippi, the middle of the iceberg. Our voice is a tremor in the middle of the iceberg, from a stone that the builders rejected." You made a similar comment about the momentous possibilities awaiting 1964. Strategically, why was this the case? Why was much hanging on Mississippi in the summer of '64?

Lewis: We wanted to bring the nation to Mississippi in order to see the realities and by doing so, take Mississippi to the nation. We knew we had to bring people to Mississippi, and we had to get people to bear witness to the harsh realities of black disenfranchisement. To involve hundreds of young people, college students; to bring organizations and church groups. To let people see the lack of political participation, the poverty of policies that existed there. To see a situation wherein less than 7% of blacks in Mississippi (in 1961) were registered to vote.[1] We had to find a way to dramatize it, and the best way was to bring in not just black, but a large number of young whites, and let people live alongside the natives, the citizens of Mississippi, and in the process, everyone can not only educate ourselves and the volunteers, but we would educate the nation about Mississippi. The Mississippi effort was an all-consuming effort. It was a very dangerous effort, but it was something that had to be done.

(Edited September 7, 2020)

[1] Fannie Lou Hamer told historian Neil McMillen that she did not know until 1962 that black people could register to vote. McMillen, "Black Enfranchisement in Mississippi," cited in Charles Marsh, *God's Long Summer*, p. 208.