

PROLOGUE, *Walking With the Wind* by John Lewis

I want to begin this book with a little story. It has nothing to do with a national stage, or historic figures, or monumental events. It's a simple story a true story about a group of young children, a wood-frame house and a windstorm.

The children were my cousins: Roy Lee and Jinnie Boy, Naomi and Leslie and Willie Muriel-about a dozen of them, all told-along with my older sister Ora and my brothers Edward and Adolph. And me, John Robert.

I was four years old at the time, too young to understand there was a war going on over in Europe and out in the Pacific as well. The grownups called it a world war, but I had no idea what that meant. The only world I knew was the one I stepped out into each morning, a place of thick pine forests and white cotton fields and red day roads winding around my family's house in our little corner of Pike County, Alabama.

We had just moved that spring onto some land my father had bought, the first land anyone in his family had ever owned-10 acres of cotton and corn and peanut fields, along with an old but sturdy three-bedroom house, a large house for that part of the county, the biggest place for miles around. It had a well in the front yard, and pecan trees out back, and muscadine grapevines growing wild in the woods all around us-our woods.

My father bought the property from a local white businessman who lived in the nearby town of Troy. The total payment was \$300. Cash. That was every penny my father had to his name, money he had earned as a sharecropper, planting, raising and picking the same crops that had been grown in that soil for hundreds of years by tribes like the Choctaws and the Chickasaws and the Creeks, Native Americans who were working this land long before the place was called Alabama, long before black or white men were anywhere to be seen in those parts.

Almost every neighbor we had in those woods was a sharecropper, and most of them were our relatives. Nearly every adult I knew was an aunt or an uncle, every child my first or second cousin. That included my uncle Rabbit and aunt Seneva and their children, who live about a half-mile or so up the road from us.

On this particular afternoon-it was a Saturday, I'm almost certain-about fifteen of us children were outside my aunt Seneva's house, playing in her dirt yard. The sky began clouding over, the wind started picking up, lightning flashed far off in the distance, and suddenly I wasn't thinking about playing anymore; I was terrified. I had already seen what lightning could do. I'd seen fields catch on fire after a hit to a haystack. I'd watched trees actually explode when a bolt of lightning struck them, the sap inside rising to an instant boil, the trunk swelling until it burst its bark. The sight of those strips of pine bark snaking through the air like ribbons was both fascinating and horrifying.

Lightning terrified me, and so did thunder. My mother used to gather us around her whenever we heard thunder and she'd tell us to hush, be still now, because God was doing his work. That was what thunder was, my mother said. It was the sound of God doing his work.

But my mother wasn't with us on this particular afternoon. Aunt Seneva was the only adult around, and as the sky blackened and the wind grew stronger, she herded us all inside.

Her house was not the biggest place around, and it seemed even smaller with so many children squeezed inside. Small and surprisingly quiet. All of the shouting and laughter that had been going on earlier, outside, had stopped. The wind was howling now, and the house was starting to shake. We were scared. Even Aunt Seneva was scared.

And then it got worse. Now the house was beginning to sway. The wood plank flooring beneath us began to bend. And then a corner of the room started lifting up.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. None of us could. This storm was actually pulling the house toward the sky. With us inside it.

That was when Aunt Seneva told us to clasp hands. Line up and hold hands, she said, and we did as we were told. Then she had us walk as a group toward the corner of the room that was rising. From the kitchen to the front of the house we walked, the wind screaming outside, sheets of rain beating on the tin roof. Then we walked back in the other direction, as another end of the house began to lift.

And so it went, back and forth, fifteen children walking with the wind, holding that trembling house down with the weight of our small bodies.

More than half a century has passed since that day, and it has struck me more than once over those many years that our society is not unlike the children in that house, rocked again and again by the winds of one storm or another, the walls around us seeming at times as if they might fly apart.

It seemed that way in the 1960s, at the height of the civil rights movement, when America itself felt as if it might burst at the seams-so much tension, so many storms. But the people of conscience never left the house. They never ran away. They stayed, they came together and they did the best they could, clasping hands and moving toward the corner of the house that was the weakest.

And then another corner would lift, and we would go there. And eventually, inevitably, the storm would settle, and the house would still stand. But we knew another storm would come, and we would have to do it all over again. And we did. And we still do, all of us. You and I.

Children holding hands, walking with the wind. That's America to me-not just the movement for civil rights but the endless struggle to respond with decency, dignity and a sense of brotherhood[/sisterhood] to all the challenges that face us as a nation, as a whole.

That is the story, in essence, of my life, of the path to which I've been committed since I turned from a boy to a man, and to which I remain committed today. It is a path that extends beyond the issue of race alone, and beyond class as well. And gender. And age. And every other distinction that tends to separate us as human beings rather than bring us together.

That path involves nothing less than the pursuit of the most precious and pure concept I have ever known, an ideal I discovered as a young man and that has guided me like a beacon ever since, a concept called the Beloved Community.

Let me tell you how I came to understand that concept, how it ushered me into the heart of the most meaningful and monumental movement of this American century, and how it might steer us all where we deserve to go in the next. Let me tell you about my life.