



CIVIL COURAGE PRIZE

Acceptance Speech

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2021

I Won't Close My Eyes: Accepting the Civil Courage Prize On Behalf of Those Who Won't Turn off Their Light

Mr. John Train, members of the Board and Trustees of the Train Foundation, distinguished guests and all gathered today:

I am deeply honored to join the esteemed lineage of Civil Courage Prize recipients, from 2019 Laureate Gonzalo Himiob Santomé to the Founding Patron, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. I'm humbled to join the company of 24 visionary leaders from around the globe.

Four decades ago, when I was a punk rock kid living in poverty and surviving racism in Southern California, if someone had told me I would one day be the recipient of such an honor, I simply couldn't have imagined it. At that point in my life, I wasn't sure I'd even live to see my late twenties.

But today, here we are. And I still can't help but be reminded of an earlier moment: the day I decided I wasn't going to run from bigotry.

That day in 1979 I was attacked in a hate crime while I waited for the bus from school. It wasn't my first time being threatened, but it was the first day I decided not to run. There is no bravado here or in that moment. It meant I took a beating, but I didn't care. I just knew I had to not run.

It is those exact moments that connect each of us to the lineage of all those who struggle against bigoted violence. I'm not the first or the last human in the United States who has or will learn this lesson. I knew – as they knew – that if I didn't proclaim my right to exist, I would forever surrender that right.

Like the emerging movements I represent today, I rest on the shoulders of generations who have resisted tyranny within the United States – the indigenous, the enslaved, the oppressed and their allies – those who fought, and in many cases were murdered, because of their thirst for a fully inclusive American democracy. One where everyone can live, love, worship, and work free from bigotry and hate.

Their names are too numerous to speak out loud here today, but my remarks shouldn't commence without first naming the late Congressman John Lewis – forever the United States' patron saint of civil courage. May his very name forever evoke the lifted spirits and the martyrs of America's great civil rights struggles – past, present, and future.

As the United States defends itself against a crushing wave of authoritarianism and bigoted violence, we have much to learn from those who came before us. Not only about the tenacity needed to carry forward the great enterprise of building a just society, but the courage needed to resist all that imperils the gains of America's civil rights movement and the strengthening American democracy that follows in its wake.

The next stage of resistance to growing authoritarianism in the United States? We must transform this nascent anti-bigotry field into its own burgeoning social movement. A movement that centers democracy, belonging and opportunity. A social movement that consciously seeks to avoid becoming that which we critique. One brave enough to heed the great sage Audre Lorde's warning, "The master's tools will never dismantle the masters house."

White supremacy can be seen as the master's house – and white nationalism, the political movement seeking to renovate that house through a campaign of ethnic cleansing. But inclusive democracy in America is not the master's house. It is the people's house, a space of radical inclusion built through the relentless labors and blood of Black and Indigenous communities and those who have joined in this intergenerational moral campaign for human dignity and fairness.

I speak today with great humility. It's because I know we have approached a moment in the United States where the words of my immediate Civil Courage Prize predecessor, Venezuelan Gonzalo Himiob Santomé, are now my own: *"I do not recognize my country. I cannot believe how low we have fallen."*

When we look at the dismantling of democratic, economic, and humanitarian institutions in Venezuela – the rule of law, independent judiciary, free press, free speech, freedom to organize, fair elections, and freedom to vote – it no longer sounds like the troubles of a far-off land. It looks very much like the footprint of the authoritarian insurgency we face here.

We in the United States working to resist authoritarianism in our own country become stronger, more effective, more courageous, when we attend to the example set by Santomé and every other Civil Courage Prize Laureate.

Here in our own country, we are blessed to have many Santomé's who epitomize courage. Not the "might is right" American bravado and exceptionalism that betrays the maturity of our nation. I'm speaking of those who dare to believe the radical notion that "Democracy is not a state. It is an act," as the Patron Saint John Lewis reminded us in his last public words.

Congressman Lewis believed that "ordinary people with extraordinary vision" – me, you, WE – could "redeem the soul of America by getting in... good trouble, necessary trouble." The Alan's, the Sandra's, the Luke's, the Sarah's, the Sean's, the Lin's, the Melissa's, the Paul's and all those

who resist the shadows of fear. These are the people in whose name I accept this award – ordinary people, *our backs to the wall, we won't run and we won't hide.*

I wish we had time to tell their stories. Some names you might know, like Heather Heyer, killed four years ago in Charlottesville by a 20-year-old who admired Hitler, and the more than 140 Capitol Police officers injured by pro-Trump rioters during the January insurrection.

I stand here today as a grateful representative of the thousands of people throughout the United States who were killed or sacrificed their lives to resist bigoted violence and authoritarianism. This list doesn't begin in 2017.

The story begins in 1979. A massacre in Greensboro, North Carolina, where members of the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party shot and killed five anti-Klan demonstrators. The list includes my adopted state of Oregon where Ethiopian student Mulugeta Seraw was lynched by neo-Nazi skinheads in 1988 and Hattie Mae Cohens and Brian Mock suffered the same fate in 1992.

These are but a few of the many taken by hate violence and political violence during my lifetime. They join the honor roll of those killed during the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century, and during the brutal eras of Jim Crow, forced labor, chattel slavery, and Native genocide.

I also reflect the stories of the countless and mostly unrecognized resisters, rescuers, allies and accomplices. The ordinary people in communities in every corner of our country who have come together under difficult circumstances in order to say, *In a world full of darkness, I won't turn out my light.*

I have the privilege of working with such people every day, at the organization I lead, Western States Center – and with the musicians and culture-makers, the community leaders and local

elected officials and other civil society organizations with whom we work. This award recognizes all of them and gives us another opportunity, in the U.S., to be a part of a global movement for human dignity.

The awarding of this prize to a U.S. recipient is an important message to the world. America's emerging anti-bigotry movement needs you. As the first American recipient, I know we can't defend democracy in America – we can't preserve and expand the civil rights won by earlier generations or work on behalf of human rights and planetary survival – without the help of the global community.

To democratic governments, civil society leaders, journalists and artists and thinkers around the world: In this moment I know it would be easy for one to think that we in America are getting what we deserve. But we are a country also made up of your descendants, of your own family members who have come here as immigrants and refugees. Please don't let understandable wariness of "American exceptionalism" cloud a truth: The health of democracy in the U.S. has very real consequences for the health of the world. I ask that in the coming years you remember that the America John Lewis aspired to is still being born.

To my fellow Americans: having the Civil Courage Prize bestowed to an American for the first time in its 21-year history is both an affirmation of those fighting to preserve and expand our inclusive democracy, and a red flag of how much is at risk. It's time for us to admit that we don't have all the answers.

We can't curb the rise of authoritarianism on our own. We can learn from immigrants and refugees joining our communities, as well as all those peoples struggling to build or sustain inclusive democracy in countries and societies around the world. I look forward to the many conversations and learnings on this topic over the next year but for today, I think I've spoken long enough.

Once again, I thank the Train Foundation for lifting up resistance to authoritarian violence and othering.

To all the previous laureates, for their example to the world: I pledge to try to live up to the bar of courage you have collectively set.

To the artists who keep souls fed and spirits lifted: you prove that music is a breath that helps to nurture the vision of inclusive democracy during its hardest moment.

To my partner Jessica and the staff of Western States Center, our tireless senior fellows, board members and national leadership network: most will never know how deep your courage and commitment are in this moment. You helped galvanize a democracy to defend itself. You are forever my very definition of bravery.

So, my dear friends and colleagues – this moment is for all of us in the United States and around the world who choose to say (in the words of UB40, a band who provided the quintessential soundtrack to my earliest years of courage):

*I won't close my eyes
When the future don't look bright.
Though the road seems too long
In a world full of darkness, I won't turn off my light.*

Let us each continue to light the way forward, together.

Thank you.