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# Walking with the Wind: The Power of Persistence

*This lesson uses resources from Chapter 12 of Facing History and Ourselves' Holocaust and Human Behavior, 4th edition, facinghistory.org/hhb.*

## Essential Questions

- What is the importance of persistence when we exercise our civic power?
- What does it take for individuals to strengthen their communities and make a positive difference in the world?

## Overview

We often think about civic participation as a matter of politics, activism, and voting. Many people participate in organized campaigns to elect candidates, change laws, and influence the actions of governments and other institutions in our society, such as corporations and the media. But these are not the only ways of choosing to participate.

Scholar Ethan Zuckerman, who studies civic engagement around the world, has noticed a trend toward types of participation that do not rely on the power of government and other institutions to make change. While some individuals choose to participate through politics, activism, and institutions, others attempt to make change through creative uses of art and technology, the formation of small businesses, and attempts to influence the norms and traditions of communities and cultures.

Zuckerman concludes:

If you feel like you can change the world through elections, through our political system, through the institutions we have—that's fantastic, so long as you're engaged in making change. If you mistrust those institutions and feel disempowered by them, ... I challenge you to find ways you can make change through code [technology], through markets, through norms [unspoken rules], through becoming a fierce and engaged monitor of the institutions we have and that we'll build.

The one stance that's not acceptable, as far as I'm concerned, is that of disengagement, of deciding that you're powerless and remaining that way.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, Facing History and Ourselves hopes to create a society of thoughtful citizens who think deeply about the way

they live. We hope that students will believe that their choices do matter and will feel compelled to think carefully about the decisions they make—as individuals, as members of a community, and as participants in a democracy—realizing that their choices will ultimately shape the world. While that participation may take many forms, one thing is constant: In an imperfect world marked by suffering and injustice, there will always be occasions to act. However, in our world of soundbites, social media, and multitasking, the necessity of persistence—and the need for solidarity in the face of fear, uncertainty, and even the feeling of being unequal to the task—cannot be underestimated or undervalued.

In this lesson, students will explore this idea through an excerpt from Congressman John Lewis's memoir. Congressman Lewis knows a thing or two about persistence, engagement, and civic power. The child of Alabama sharecroppers, Lewis became a civil rights leader in the 1960s and was elected to the U.S. Congress in 1986. In 2013, reflecting on the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, during the second term of the United States' first African American presidency, Lewis made it clear that the fight for voting rights continues: "If you ask me whether the election ... is the fulfillment of Dr. King's dream, I say, 'No, it's just a down payment.' There's still too many people 50 years later, there's still too many people that are being left out and left behind."<sup>2</sup> Now 78 years old, Lewis has never stopped working for a more just world.

## Using the Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World Teaching Strategy

Reading comes alive when we recognize how the ideas in a text connect to our own experiences and beliefs, our knowledge of other texts, our understanding of history, and events happening in the larger world. The Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World strategy helps students develop the habit of making these connections as they read. When students are given a purpose for their reading, they are able to better comprehend and make meaning of the ideas in the text.

You can use this strategy with any type of text, historical or literary, and with other media, such as film. It can be used at the beginning, middle, or end of the reading process to get students engaged with a text, to help students understand the text more deeply, or to evaluate students' understanding of the text.

## Materials

Handout 1: “Walking with the Wind” (p. 269)

Handout 2: Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World (p. 270)

## Procedure

### 1. Read “Walking with the Wind”

Distribute copies of the “Walking with the Wind” reading to students and briefly discuss the life of Congressman John Lewis. After students have read the excerpt, either on their own or as a class, distribute the Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World handout.

### 2. Guide Students through Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World

The accompanying handout provides you with sample questions that you can give students to guide them through this activity. The questions in the directions are general, but you can make them more specific to connect to the material your class has been studying. For example, you might ask students to connect this reading to specific texts or events you have studied earlier in the school year. If you have limited time, you can give students the option of writing about one connection they have found between the reading and another text, their lives, or the larger world.

### 3. Debrief Student Responses

Students gain a deeper understanding of the text, their classmates, and the world around them when they have the opportunity to discuss their responses with peers. Students can share their responses in small groups or with a partner (using a Think-Pair-Share teaching strategy):

- **Think:** Have students write their responses to the handout.
- **Pair:** Have students pair up with one other student and share their responses.

- **Share:** When the larger group reconvenes, ask pairs to report back on their conversation. Alternatively, you can ask students to share what their partner said. In this way, this strategy focuses students’ skills as careful listeners, an important skill for civic engagement.

### 4. Connection Questions

Once students have had a chance to share their personal responses to the text, uncover deeper meanings with these Connection questions as a class or as journal prompts.

- How does John Lewis use the metaphor of “walking with the wind” to talk about the role of a citizen in society? What does his metaphor suggest about what it takes to strengthen communities and make a positive difference in the world?
- Why was it important that “the people of conscience never left the house”?
- What do you think about Lewis’s conviction that “another storm would come, and we would have to do it all over again”? What other examples of this sort of persistence have you encountered in your own experience or in the world around you? How do we sustain our commitment to issues we care about?

### Notes

1. Ethan Zuckerman, “Insurrectionist Civics in the Age of Mistrust,”... *My Heart’s in Accra* (blog), posted October 19, 2015, [www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2015/10/19/insurrectionist-civics-in-the-age-of-mistrust/](http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2015/10/19/insurrectionist-civics-in-the-age-of-mistrust/).
2. Lauren Carter, “Rep. John Lewis Reflects on the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington,” *The Griot*, Entertainment Studios LLC. Posted August 21, 2013, <https://thegriot.com/2013/08/21/rep-john-lewis-reflects-on-the-50th-anniversary-of-the-march-on-washington/>.

# ***Walking with the Wind***

As a young student, John Lewis worked with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and became a key leader of the civil rights movement in the United States. He later became a U.S. congressman and a prominent voice for human rights and justice around the world. In the prologue to his memoir, Lewis tells a story from his childhood to describe his vision of how we can face profound challenges and make a better world.

[A]bout 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...

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...\*

\* John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), xvi–xvii.

## **Text-to-Text, Text-to-Self, Text-to-World Handout**

*Use the copy of the text provided by your teacher to make any notes. Read the text once, and then read it again to find ideas that you can use to answer the following questions.*

**1. Text-to-Text: How do the ideas in this text remind you of another text (story, book, movie, song, etc)?**

Complete one of the following statements:

What I just read reminds me of \_\_\_\_\_ (story/book/movie/song) because...

The ideas in this text are similar to the ideas in \_\_\_\_\_ because...

The ideas in this text are different than the ideas in \_\_\_\_\_ because...

**2. Text-to-Self: How do the ideas in this text relate to your own life, ideas, and experiences?**

Complete one of the following statements:

What I just read reminds me of the time when I...

I agree with/understand what I just read because in my own life...

I don't agree with what I just read because in my own life...

**3. Text-to-World: How do the ideas in this text reading relate to the larger world—past, present and future. Complete one of the following statements:**

What I just read makes me think about \_\_\_\_\_ (event from the past) because...

What I just read makes me think about \_\_\_\_\_ (event from today related to my own community, nation or world) because...

What I just read makes me wonder about the future because...

