




THERE CAN BE NO GREAT SOCIAL GAIN WITHOUT INDIVIDUAL PAIN. AND BEFORE THE VICTORY FOR BROTHERHOOD IS WON, SOME WILL HAVE TO GET SCARRED UP A BIT.

From King's speech at the Great March on Detroit, delivered at the church pastored by Reverend C.L. Franklin, June 23, 1963



A close-up portrait of an elderly African American man, Reverend Joseph Lowery. He has white hair, a white mustache, and a gentle expression. He is wearing a dark grey pinstriped suit jacket over a dark red turtleneck sweater. A gold chain with a cross pendant is visible around his neck. The background is solid black.

At eighty-six,
former SCLC
president Reverend
Joseph Lowery
remains as
fearless as ever.
By Chandra R. Thomas

PHOTOGRAPH BY ZACH WOLFE

THE REVEREND JOSEPH LOWERY is uncharacteristically quiet as he sits at a long table inside the modest room in Downtown's Atlanta Life Insurance Company building. Between bites of fried chicken and peach cobbler, he occasionally interjects or asks a question, but mostly he listens attentively, staring out at a group that's as diverse as the issues for which its members are so passionate.

A graying African American civil rights activist discussing the need to register more voters sits next to a white woman—a soccer-mom type with three young children in tow (including an infant in a carrier on her back)—who rattles off her pro-life platform. A middle-aged man with Barack Obama pins plastered all over his denim jacket sits just a few feet away from the Latina woman planning a youth rally.

The delegation gathers every Tuesday around noon for Georgia Coalition for the Peoples' Agenda meetings. GCPA is an organization headed by Lowery that brings representatives from various civil rights organizations together to work on issues of common concern, including economic empowerment, prison reform, and environmental justice. When Lowery does speak, they all lean in attentively, as if they're trying to soak up every bit of wisdom espoused by the eighty-six-year-old civil rights activist, who has been crusading since his days as a young minister in segregated Alabama.

"I think it's given him the opportunity to maintain contact with the people," says Helen Butler of GCPA, the organization Lowery launched after he retired from the

pulpit in 1992. "He thrives off that and it gives him energy. It's like his ministry for the people." Adds Faye Coffield, a private investigator who heads the organization's criminal justice committee: "His legacy will be that he was fearless, even when it was unpopular. Unfortunately there aren't a lot of leaders like that left today."

Lowery keeps plenty busy between the coalition and the Joseph E. Lowery Institute, a social justice center established in 2001 at Clark Atlanta University to provide free forums on human and civil rights issues. Lowery has survived prostate cancer, throat surgery, and Jim Crow. He sometimes complains about arthritis in his leg, but it's hard to believe that the sprightly Methodist minister is eighty-six, not sixty-eight. The outspoken leader, once dubbed the "dean of the civil rights movement" by former NAACP president Kweisi Mfume, has not relinquished his crown nor officially passed the torch.

"Martin's gone, Ralph's gone, Hosea's gone, and God has given me enough good health to stay around, and it's not because I'm so wise," Lowery says. "I figure the Lord has kept me here for a reason—to do more work."

D Depending on your personal politics, the name Joseph Lowery prompts a distinct reaction. To those who revere him, he is a celebrated civil

rights leader, gifted orator, respected Methodist minister, impassioned political activist, and tireless public servant. Adversaries regard him as an irrational race-baiter and unyielding rabble-rouser. He's been called a communist. His café au lait skin, wavy salt and pepper hair, and dapper mustache are every bit dear old granddad, but get him talking about one of his hot-button issues—the controversial Genarlow Wilson and Jena Six cases, a death penalty moratorium, justice for Hurricane Katrina victims, his reasons for supporting Democratic presidential hopeful Barack Obama—and the gentle lamb turns ferocious feline.

"Poverty still casts a shadow over this country; so much has changed and so much has stayed the same," says Lowery, who in 1957 along with Martin Luther King Jr. and Reverend Ralph David Abernathy helped found the Atlanta-based Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), which



SCENES FROM A LIFE (clockwise from top left): Andrew Young, King, and Lowery share a moment in 1964; Joseph and Evelyn Lowery with Rosa Parks at a Morehouse College event; Lowery with Coretta Scott King; Lowery and Reverend John Nettles at a 1977 racial discrimination protest in Wrightsville, Georgia; Lowery leads a 1984 protest on Monroe Drive, in front of the Winn Dixie grocery store (now Trader Joe's). For a photo gallery of Lowery through the years, go to atlantamagazine.com.

drew most of its leadership from Southern black churches and played a critical role in desegregation. “We have more black police officers and chiefs, but police brutality is still there. We have come a long way in this country, but we have a long way to go.”

After serving as vice president, chairman of the board, and chief executive officer of SCLC, Lowery succeeded King and Abernathy as the organization's president in 1977 and served until 1997, the longest tenure of any SCLC president. *Ebony* magazine twice named him one of the nation's “Fifteen Greatest Black Preachers,” describing him as “the consummate voice of biblical social relevancy.” During his twenty-three years on the MARTA board of directors, he helped minority-owned businesses—traditionally absent from the negotiating table—land millions of dollars in contracts. He was among the first group of inductees in the International Civil Rights Hall of Fame in

Downtown Atlanta, and in 2001, the Atlanta City Council voted to rename Ashby Street, which intersects both Martin Luther King Jr. Drive and Ralph David Abernathy Freeway in southwest Atlanta, Joseph E. Lowery Boulevard. In later decades he branched out beyond traditional civil rights action. He participated in environmental justice demonstrations, for example, including a massive protest against the dumping of toxic waste in a rural, predominantly black community in Warren County, North Carolina.

Lowery is equally passionate about his international endeavors. He is cofounder and chairman emeritus of the Black Leadership Forum (BLF), a consortium of national black advocacy organizations that protested apartheid in South Africa in the mid-1970s (until Nelson Mandela's election in 1994). Lowery succeeded former Bill Clinton aide Vernon Jordan and former NAACP President Benjamin Hooks as BLF's third

president. He also spearheaded SCLC protests that resulted in key victories in efforts to raise awareness about apartheid. SCLC picketing is believed to have contributed to Atlanta-based Southern Company's decision to discontinue a ten-year coal-purchasing contract with South Africa. The SCLC's boycott of Winn Dixie Foods ended with the supermarket chain pulling all South African products from its stores. Lowery was among the first five people arrested at the South African Embassy in Washington during a 1984 “Free South Africa” campaign. He later co-chaired Nelson Mandela's 1990 visit to Atlanta and delivered the keynote address at a dinner in Durban honoring Mandela's retirement. He once led a

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Joseph Lowery

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peace delegation to Central America and another in the Middle East, where he met with the president of Lebanon and Yasser Arafat to discuss nonviolent resolutions to the region's conflict.

"His commitment to humankind is his greatest legacy," says longtime colleague and fellow activist John Evans. "There are so many things he's been involved in that have made this country and this world better. He has laid a foundation for all of us to follow."

Amid the many victories Lowery has weathered his share of controversy. In 1960, the Montgomery police commissioner sued him and three other ministers (including Abernathy) for libel over a *New York Times* ad that sought to raise funds for King's defense against felony charges related to alleged false statements in his 1956 and 1958 Alabama tax returns. An all-white jury initially ordered the ministers to pay \$500,000, and Lowery's car was seized and sold at public auction. Four years later the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the libel verdict.

As recently as four years ago, the SCLC board, then headed by Claud Young, a Detroit physician, sued Lowery and his wife, Evelyn, who founded the organization SCLC/W.O.M.E.N. Young claimed that Lowery violated his responsibility to the SCLC when, in 1994, he leased office space to Evelyn and her organization for \$1 a year. The complaint also accused Evelyn Lowery's group of fraudulently using the SCLC name for fundraising purposes without gaining approval. Evelyn Lowery—a civil rights icon in her own right—maintains that despite having similar names, the organizations are unaffiliated. Current SCLC president Charles Steele Jr. dropped the suit after he took office in November 2004, but Evelyn Lowery doesn't make much effort to disguise the disappointment and feelings of betrayal that have lingered since the lawsuit. "We have no connection whatsoever," she says of her organization and the SCLC, located just a few doors apart on Auburn Avenue.

"We're a family, and all families have disagreements, but disagreements can also be worked out," says Steele of the SCLC, which earlier this year was cited by the IRS for fail-

ing to file financial reports for nearly three years. At press time, Steele had pledged that the nonprofit organization would have the reports filed and available for public record within six weeks.

Steele, who notes that two years ago, in the aftermath of the lawsuit controversy, Lowery officiated at his oldest daughter's wedding, adds, "It was tough for me. It was tough for everyone, because he and Mrs. Lowery have been an integral part of my life and my family's. Without their work I wouldn't be where I am today. He has a gift for bringing people together, so it was only natural that we would stay focused and work out our own problems."

The Lowerys have worked side by side in the civil rights movement for more than half a century. One of their first major endeavors came in 1955 when Lowery, then head of the Alabama Civic Affairs Association, helped spearhead the Montgomery bus boycott sparked by Rosa Parks's arrest. Just two years later, he helped King, Abernathy, and other black ministers form the SCLC.

Those early days were filled with harassing phone calls and death threats, but even

with five small children, Evelyn Lowery says she and her husband never considered walking away from their fight. “We were fearless,” recalls Evelyn Lowery, who in 1979 dodged bullets during a march protesting the conviction of a mentally challenged black man accused of rape. “We were just committed to our cause. It never dawned on us that we were in extreme danger. There used to be a Catholic priest who looked

out for us. He would send his [white] students to the Klan meetings and tell us when they were plotting to bomb our house.”

In 1968, the year King was assassinated, Lowery was transferred from Birmingham to southwest Atlanta to assume the pastorate of Central United Methodist Church. In 1977, he succeeded Abernathy as SCLC president. From 1986 until his retirement in 1992, Lowery served as pastor of Cascade United



Lowery speaks his mind at the funeral for Coretta Scott King, 2006.

Methodist Church in southwest Atlanta. During his tenure, Cascade’s membership grew by more than 1,000 members, to 2,500; church funds increased to \$1 million.

Evelyn Lowery says her husband’s outspoken public persona runs contrary to his demeanor with his family, particularly with their grown children and grandchildren. “He’s as mild as a lamb at home, especially with his daughters,” she says. “He eats way

too many sweets, and we’re trying to slow him down on that. He loves cakes and cobblers.” As the ails of aging disable his peers, Lowery still crisscrosses the country—often the world—for speaking engagements. If he’s not doing that he’s usually at a protest or a community meeting that will likely yield one. “He’s like the Energizer Bunny—he keeps going and going,” jokes state Representative Tyrone Brooks, who’s known Lowery since Brooks joined the

SCLC in the 1960s.

Those who know Lowery say his pastoral prowess mixed with an innate sense of humor endow him with a disarming ability to command attention and inspire others to mobilize. “He’s certainly one of our country’s national treasures. He puts his finger on the pulse of what’s the right thing to do in society, and he expresses it so well,” says Ed Arnold, a member of the Atlanta chapter of

Physicians for Social Responsibility, which works with GCPA. “He makes himself so accessible. He is a person who loves deeply. You get the sense he loves everybody.”

LOWERY IS BEST KNOWN—in recent years, at least—for his controversial remarks at the February 2006 funeral of Coretta Scott King, at New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia. More than 10,000 mourners had filled the sanctuary to capacity. Four U.S. presidents were there—Clinton, Carter, both Bushes. Three first ladies. Fourteen U.S. senators. Stevie Wonder. Maya Angelou. Jesse Jackson. “Who could’ve brought this crowd together except Coretta?” Lowery said before launching into a rhythmic poem that began simply, with Lowery praising Scott King’s role as a mother and wife and her ability to “carry her grief with dignity.” Then his verse took a political turn.

“She extended Martin’s message against poverty, racism, and war. She deplored the terror inflicted by our smart bombs on missions way afar. We know now that there were no weapons of mass destruction over there,” continued Lowery, sending much of the crowd to its feet. “But Coretta knew, and we know, that there are weapons of misdirection right down here. Millions without health insurance. Poverty abounds. For war billions more, but no more for the poor.”

President Bush and First Lady Laura Bush smiled awkwardly in their seats as the crowd applauded for nearly two minutes. Before returning to his seat, Lowery shook hands with everyone on the pulpit—even President Bush, whose policies he had criticized just seconds before.

“Everyone may not like what he has to say, but he’s always consistent,” says Terry Walker, executive director of Lowery’s institute at Clark Atlanta. “There aren’t many in our community to expend themselves and be vulnerable to criticism.”

You don’t criticize the policies of the leader of the free world—especially while he’s sitting just a few feet away in a ceremony beamed all over the world—without igniting a media furor. Bloggers, political analysts, and even the elder President Bush weighed in (he told reporters he felt Lowery’s words were “kind of ugly”). During appearances on Fox News and MSNBC, Lowery vigorously defended himself. “I was asked by the family to give a civil rights and human rights tribute,” he said on Fox’s *Hannity & Colmes*.

“What did you expect me to talk about, wine and roses?” Elizabeth Omilami, daughter of Lowery’s longtime colleague and fellow civil rights activist the late Hosea Williams, says she didn’t expect anything less from the man she likens to a grandfather. “[The King family] knew what they were getting when they invited him to speak,” she says. “They knew nothing would change because the president was [sitting] behind him. He doesn’t care who’s listening; he speaks from his heart and that’s what makes him such a great leader.”

Locally, Lowery was cheered by callers on predominantly black talk-radio station WAOK and jeered by conservatives such as WSB radio host Neal Boortz, who has described Lowery as a “race warlord” who derives power solely from “generating racial tension.” (Boortz declined an interview request for this story.)

Conservative African American talk-show host Shelley Wynter of *The Right Side* on WAOK openly criticized Lowery’s decision to talk about the Iraq war during the funeral. But he says this is the only time he has criticized Lowery and is quick to add that, in fact, he feels Lowery, more than other black leaders, has remained committed to King’s ideology. “When you’re around him, unlike some others like Jesse Jackson, Al Sharpton, and John Lewis, you never get the sense that he’s doing what he does for another reason than a pure love in his heart,” says Wynter. “We all look at him as an icon, and I think history will be kind to him. When it’s all said and done, he’s a guy we can all look up to and say, ‘This is how I want to live my life.’”

Standing by his comments with an unwavering consistency is the cornerstone of Lowery’s well-known personal motto, borrowed from an old Quaker saying: “speaking truth to power.”

“At eighty-six he is still willing to speak truth to power. That’s why we love him so much,” says state Senator Vincent Fort. “Some people wouldn’t do what he does at *twenty-six*.”

Although highly publicized, the funeral incident wasn’t the first time Lowery had gotten political at a high-profile funeral. During services for Rosa Parks, known as the “mother of the civil rights movement,” he cornered Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, one of the most powerful women on earth, and solicited her help with efforts to extend the

Voting Rights Act. Lowery later joked with a reporter that he'd approached her there "because I knew she could not move."

Even Lowery's constituents aren't immune from his brashness. Just last spring, he stunned attendees at a crowded SCLC fiftieth anniversary celebration dinner in Atlanta when, while at the podium accepting an award from the organization, he berated its leaders—including current president Charles Steele Jr.—for divisive infighting.

"Whatever he does, he does in love," says Steele. "He has the right to speak his mind. I think it's wonderful to see someone who has the courage to lead. He always addresses the powers that be with what he feels in his heart is the truth."

UPSTAGING ARETHA FRANKLIN isn't easy, but when Lowery and his wife joined the Queen of Soul on stage last November at the Fox Theatre during his eighty-sixth birthday celebration—a concert benefiting his institute—the audience, filled with Atlanta's black elite (including former Atlanta Mayor Andrew Young, Atlanta City Councilman Michael Julian Bond, actor/director Tyler Perry, and Coca-Cola Company executive Ingrid Saunders Jones) gave a rousing standing ovation.

"Ree Ree, child, you ain't lost a thing," joked Lowery, dressed in a sharp dark suit.

The audience roared in laughter.

"You make me feel like a natural man!" Lowery said.

Evelyn played to the crowd, animatedly pouting until her husband playfully kissed her cheek.

"I just want to know if you're going to sing 'Respect,'" Lowery asked Franklin.

The diva, whose father, the late Reverend C.L. Franklin, worked with Lowery and King during the civil rights movement, apparently had not planned to sing her signature hit when she wrapped for the night, but she called her band back to the stage so as not to disappoint the guest of honor, now back in his front-row seat.

As Franklin belted out the first note, Lowery sprung to his feet, swaying and singing along. The crowd swiftly abandoned its reserved demeanor and joined in. Clearly a nod of respect to a man who won't let up. ■

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