

The Journal of Values-Based Leadership

Volume 13
Issue 1 *Winter/Spring 2020*

Article 2

January 2020

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Recommended Citation

Gingerich, Elizabeth (2020) "A Tribute to Elijah E. Cummings," *The Journal of Values-Based Leadership*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22543/0733.131.1301>

Available at: <https://scholar.valpo.edu/jvbl/vol13/iss1/2>

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A TRIBUTE TO ELIJAH EUGENE CUMMINGS

(January 18, 1951 – October 17, 2019)¹

At the age of 68, after a lifetime of public service, Representative Elijah Eugene Cummings, Chairman of House Oversight Committee – the key entity involved in the Trump impeachment inquiry – succumbed to illness, signing a final subpoena at his deathbed. His death garnered words of heartfelt loss from colleagues of both political affiliations, men and women of conservative and progressive leanings, who recalled the positive impact of this person both on the floor of the House as well as behind closed doors, indicative of his vast personal relationship network. Cummings’ actions and statements transcended simply transactional analysis, prompting more substantial reflection.

Pain - Passion - Purpose

Everyone, without exception, has experienced the depths of pain, at least subjectively, during the course of their lifetimes. While opportunity and environment, gender and physical limitations – the primary determinants of a person’s upbringing and development – differ, in some instances, rather radically, the question that we must pose to ourselves is, “So ... where do we go from here?” The desire to uplift and invigorate others is often anemically expressed by such clichés as “making lemonade from lemons” or “making a silk purse from a sow’s ear.” Seldom is that sustaining, let alone sufficient to motivate for the long-term.

So believed Congressional leader Elijah Cummings. During a 2017 hearing where he battled to preserve and expand medical coverage under the *Affordable Care Act* in the face of fierce conservative opposition, he bolstered his argument, deriving inspiration from the tenacity of disabled activists, by saying,

“There is something about pain that is a driving force; when bad things happen to you, do not ask the question as to why did it happen TO me? Ask why did it happen FOR me?”

In this way, we can all **TURN PAIN INTO PASSION INTO PURPOSE**. Accentuating this reckoning, was Cummings’ further directive: “For every season, there is a reason.” He believed that we must command our conscience to guide our conduct.



The Urgency of Now

Climate change, deteriorating foreign relations, inaction in healthcare and criminal justice, sensible gun laws, civil rights, equal pay...only a few of the national, international, and in some cases existential, issues addressed by Cummings. Cummings indefatigably invoked the need for

¹ Primary sources include the US Congressional Record (1996-2019), funeral eulogies, and Cummings’ own Twitter postings.

action, continually emphasizing that the time to do so was waning. Children go to school, ever anxious about rogue shooters; unrelenting wildfires consume California all year round, threatening lives, property, wildlife, and business operations; ice sheets are melting at such a rapid pace as to place coastal residents in immediate jeopardy and threaten the mere existence of entire municipalities; and many Americans face the persistent threat of personal financial ruin with the onset of one catastrophic illness. Cummings knew that not one minute should be spared as so much work is yet to be done.

He famously recited, in open Congressional session, what is known as the *Minute Poem* by Civil Rights leader, Dr. Benjamin E. Mays:

*I only have a minute,
60 seconds in it
forced upon me.
I did not choose it,
but I know that I must use it,
give account if I abuse it,
suffer if I lose it.
Only a tiny little minute,
but eternity is in it.*

It was commonly known in Congressional circles that Cummings soliloquized this poem as many as 20 times a time in an attempt to self-motivate. He frequently opined that time was precious and the need to act thus interminably upon all of us. To do so effectively, Cummings summoned all to experience life in conjunction with others, preferably different from one's self; to commit to learn from one another; and to always strive to lift each other up. Cummings often described his philosophy as uniquely simplistic:

Do something! Just go out and do something!

How tempting it is to just resign our lives – especially towards the end of our years – to bask in physical comfort, shutting off any news of crises, unpleasanties, and unresolved inequities in order to fully concentrate on self and immediate family and friends. But Cummings believed that no matter how daunting a problem appeared – and irrespective of the concomitant helplessness experienced – there was surely something that could be done. He never failed to *seize the moment*.



A True Christian Soldier

Rare indeed is the individual who can be described as spiritually authentic. Philosopher and writer, Dr. Joseph P. Hester, attests that spiritual authenticity is inextricably linked to, and emanates from, connection with others; it is measured through discernible communal impact. It is this type of engagement with others that generates moral awareness, enabling each to effectuate substantial reform through such regular contact. Hester reflectively asks: “What can I do to amplify the thin sliver of one small life, even my own life, so that in the vast future in which I will not take part, where many will not know who I was, how I loved and hated and succeeded and failed, and longed and won and lost, I will have been a servant of an even larger ethical purpose?” Projecting this esprit

that one person can live a life imbued with purpose and selfless action, Cummings undauntingly championed the causes of social reform and justice while providing a voice to the voiceless.

Cummings' philosophy of life is often described in tandem with a particular biblical passage. From *40 Isaiah 31*:

Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint.

His faith-grounded tenets were often demonstrated by his compassion and love for others as well as his ostensible devotion to family. This public servant toiled to guarantee that those forgotten had access to the same opportunities to which he had been afforded. His life validated those principles which could be projected onto the larger community-country-world. He spoke of the possibility that one's destiny was not necessarily pre-ordained; rather, by embracing God's message of love for all people and by expressing that gift through deliberative actions could one attain a purposeful and meaningful life. In essence, according to Cummings, there are no assurances of either grandeur or hopeless exile in life – but rather the realization that every human being holds the power to exude goodness and mercy ... if so elected.

Defining Our Place in History

Cummings' love of his city, state, and country, as well as of its democratic processes generally, were widely evident and undeniably profound. This was demonstrated shortly after the arrest and death of Freddie Gray, a Baltimore man who died in police custody in 2015. His death propelled Cummings to declare during a fiery speech at Gray's funeral:

I've often said that our children are the living messages we send to the future we will never see, but now, our children are sending us to a future they will never see,

This statement was not only used in conjunction with a call for criminal justice reform and an overhaul in local police force training methods to be better aware of the needs of the communities served. He also applied this visionary, yet haunting, message to the unrestrained anthropogenic forces determining the extent of climate change as well as to the legislative stagnancy of gun violence prevention.



Cummings often touted what he believed to be a universal call to refrain from deriving motivation through money or titles, but to rather funnel passion, ability, and resources to selflessly champion truth over power. Complacency was the death knell; questioning the mandate. And he most recently demonstrated this commitment to challenge with respect to the political turmoil in Washington, D.C., finding little patience for those who subverted the country's future and the unrestrained pursuit of truth to align with divisive matters of partisanship, stating:



I am begging the American people to pay attention to what is going on, because if you want to have a democracy intact for your children and your children's children and generations yet unborn, we have got to guard this moment. This is our watch.

He believed that the cost of inaction, inattention, and grandstanding might quite possibly be the cessation of liberty and the destruction of democracy. Incorporating his *modus operandi* of making every moment in life count, Cummings reminded both colleague and constituent during the ongoing investigation into the Trump administration:

*When we're dancing with the angels, the question will be asked in 2019:
What did we do to make sure we kept our democracy intact?
Did we stand on the sidelines and say nothing?*

Passing It On

Cummings called others to mentor youth much as he did with freshman members of Congress, often declaring to these newly elected representatives, "I won't let you fall." He believed in lifting up the next generation of leaders, beginning with his days as an activist in his hometown of Baltimore and extending to the halls of Congress where he sought to advocate for the rights of all marginalized people across America, with dogged determination, seeking liaisons and building productive relationships along the way. As Speaker of the House and fellow Baltimore native Nancy Pelosi recounted during Cummings' funeral: "Send me as many freshmen as you can because I want to help them be oriented to reach the full, their fullest potential in the House of Representatives."

Making Waves - Even in Death



During life, Cummings' attainments were groundbreaking: a graduate of Howard University and the University of Maryland School of Law, Cummings became the first African-American Speaker Pro Tem of the Maryland House of Delegates. He was a Democrat who was eventually elected to represent Maryland's 7th Congressional District in 1996. During his House tenure, Cummings was one of the first legislators to decry any legislation that would permit employers to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. His work to lower the cost of prescription drugs has produced signature legislation that bears his name

posthumously.

Cummings was the first African-American lawmaker to ever lie in repose in the U.S. capital on the same catapult as Abraham Lincoln. This act was the result of a bipartisan agreement, bringing together politicians from both parties. It is yet to be seen if his recent work as Chairman of the House Oversight and Reform Committee during which time he delivered severe critiques of the Trump administration, ultimately bears fruit. During one such hearing in February 2019, Cummings commented on his mother's dying words the year



before. She ardently communicated the urgency to protect the democratic process over which so many had championed and died:

She had fought and seen people harmed, beaten, trying to vote. Talk about inalienable rights. Voting is crucial. And I don't give a damn how you look at it: There are efforts to stop people from voting. That's not right. This is not Russia. This is the United States of America.

— Elizabeth F. R. Gingerich, Editor-in-Chief, *JVBL*