

Taiwo Odunowo, NJ – 2018

I am deeply passionate about authentic leadership. I was not born a leader, but I made the choice to become one. I choose to lead because the world is in need of strong, respectable and honest leaders. In today's world, a person can walk into schools, hotels and churches and instantly kill dozens of innocent people. As a leader, I can work with groups that share a common goal — to combat the issue of gun violence.

I aspire to become a role model for future leaders. I can inspire every young person that they are already leaders. We are all superheroes if we choose to be (and I for one want to be the Batman of my city). Those were my thoughts as I sat in the presence of the nation's most influential leaders. These leaders are the superheroes of America. The driving forces that willingly uphold the Constitution for the pursuit of happiness, liberty, and justice for all.

To find one word, or a couple sentences to reflect on the seven days of Washington Week, would simply be an understatement. This week, undoubtedly, has been one of the greatest experiences of my life thus far. The pivotal moment of Washington Week was hearing Civil Rights activist and leader, Congressman John Lewis, speak. Part of his speech was about racial discrimination; another subject I am deeply passionate about. Racial discrimination — it is unethical, disheartening and disturbing. Social media only perpetuates and exacerbates the problem. Discrimination and racism divide us while inviting hate and envy.

At the conclusion of our hour with Congressman John Lewis, I explicitly remembered crying. Major Alvarez was sitting to my left, while Meg Jones, sat to my right. And I explained to both of them, "for the first time in my life, I do not know what my fight is. There is so much more work in America that needs to be done in order to demolish the systematic oppression on black Americans. However, our people in Africa are still suffering greatly from the daunting effects of the scramble for Africa. What should I do? What and where should my fight be? Here or back home, Africa?" I said all this meanwhile Meg was offering me a shoulder to cry on, and tissues to wipe my tears off with (thank you Meg). Congressman John Lewis's words were powerful, they were fierce, and they liberated my mind and sparked an epiphany. I remember sitting down while going through all of Meg's tissues and asking myself, "how can words be this powerful?" I still recollect when I approached Congressman John Lewis on his way out. He stretched forward to shake my hand, and asked "where you from son?" While I firmly responded to his hand shake, I stood and gazed at him for what seem not to be short of a quarter minute, and then said, "Nigeria, I'm from Nigeria, sir". He smiled back and responded, "I've been there before". I still cannot fathom my encounter with Congressman John Lewis. There are superheroes in this world, and there are also those who created the paradigm for these superheroes to follow. Congressman John Lewis is indeed a creator of this paradigm. And to be personally labeled a "paradigm shifter" of the United States Senate Youth Program by several delegates and Military Mentors, was indeed an honor and an empowering moment.

Later that evening after my encounter with Congressman John Lewis, I had the chance to talk with Senator Cory Booker, and shared with him my epiphany from earlier. As I spoke, Senator Booker smiled and nodded, and said to me, "you have to choose what to fight for. No one else can make that decision for you, except yourself". Great! I had the daunting epiphany from Congressman John Lewis's speech, and now Senator Cory Booker's wise words to leave my mind puzzled. On the bus ride home, I thought of what my incentive is as a public servant — to make life better for black people, and others suffering from injustice and inequality, globally. At midnight, before I and my roommate, Thomas, went to sleep, I shared with him my earlier epiphany and conversation with Senator Cory Booker. After a deep sigh and a well-thought response, he said to me, "greater strides are made in places that needs the greatest help". I was heartened by Thomas's words. Finally, my puzzled mind began to take form.

Washington Week has truly been a transformational week for me. It has been influential, empowering, and inspirational. And as for my fight? In the future, I plan to return to Orange (my city in New Jersey), as an agent of change and pursue public office. As an elected leader in Orange, I can merge my Batman dreams (without the mask and cape) with community support. My goal is a community that builds solutions as a team, building a safer and more successful Orange. "Stop! Wait a minute. Fill my cup, put some I*qour in it" (woah, never mind, this isn't Uptown Funk by Mark Ronson, featuring Bruno Mars). As a developed and well-equipped public servant with years of experience, I plan to return to Nigeria, and initiate the strive for the abolishment of the exploitation of Africa's resources. Together with global leaders such as another fellow future leader that I met this week, Robert, from Tanzania, we can strive to create a centralized government in Africa. The United States Senate Youth Program and Washington Week helped me realized my passion and purpose. Thank you!