Title of Lesson: Martin Luther King and Writing as a Tool for Social Change

Lesson By: Nicholas Kuroly

Grade Level/Subject Areas: Middle school / ELA or Social Studies

Class Size: Any

Time/Duration of Lesson: 1-2 lessons (could be extended with follow-up lessons)

Guiding Questions:
How did MLK use writing to affect social change?
How can writing be an effective response to injustice?

Lesson Abstract:
Students will understand the how writing can be a powerful, nonviolent tool in response to injustice. Students will interpret and analyze King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”. Even though King was in solitary confinement, he could not be silenced. Writing gave him a voice to address the injustices occurring in Birmingham and refute the criticisms of white moderates. Students will analyze the letter as a piece of persuasive writing and discuss how writing can be used as an agent of social change.

Lesson Content:
In 1963, Martin Luther King wrote his “Letter from Birmingham Jail” as a response to eight white ministers critical of his campaign in Birmingham, Alabama. The letter not only had an immediate impact, it has continued to inspire social justice movements around the world. Archbishop Desmond Tutu often quoted the letter in his sermons during the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa. It has been translated into 40 different languages and used in nonviolent freedom movements in Poland, East Germany, Argentina, and Palestine. In addition to inspiring others, writing can give voice to the voiceless. Writing can have a tremendous impact on the world.

Birmingham, Alabama was a particularly hostile place to live for African-Americans in the early 1960s. Between 1957 and 1963, 17 bombings of churches and homes of civil rights leaders went unsolved. African-Americans had to face other forms of violence as well. They lived in what King called “the most segregated city in America” (Claybourne, 1998, 173). Housing, stores, recreational facilities and even churches were segregated. African-Americans were regulated to low-paying jobs when they could find employment. African-Americans only made up one-eighth of registered voters in Birmingham, although they made up 40% of the population.

In 1962, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference joined Rev Shuttlesworth in Birmingham in the hopes of “breaking the back of segregation all over the nation” (Claybourne, 1998, 174). The group decided to focus their efforts on the business community, centered in downtown Birmingham. After a few delays, the campaign began in earnest in April of 1963.

The first phase of the campaign included lunch counter sit-ins and nightly meetings where King
talked about the power of nonviolent resistance. King asked for volunteers for his “nonviolent army” – an army that would not retaliate in the face of brutal violence. Next, King organized marches on City Hall, boycotts of downtown stores, kneel-ins at churches, and a voter registration drive. On April 10, the city obtained an injunction against mass public demonstrations. King and others decided to disobey the court order. King said, “We cannot in all good conscience obey such an injunction which is unjust, undemocratic, and unconstitutional misuse of the legal process. We do this not out of any disrespect for the law but out of the highest respect for the law” (Claybourne, 1998, 181).

On April 12, Good Friday, King and 50 other activists began their march from church to the downtown area in defiance of the court order. As they approached downtown, the activists, including King, were arrested. King spent over 24 hours in solitary confinement. While in jail, someone secretly gave King a copy of the Birmingham News. In the paper was a public statement issued by eight white Alabama clergymen entitled “A Call For Unity.” The statement criticized the demonstrations as “unwise and untimely” as well as unlawful. The ministers’ statement affected King greatly. He said, “I became so concerned and even upset and at points so righteously indignant that I decided to answer the letter” (Claybourne, 1998, 187).

On April 16, King composed his response in the margin of the newspaper and on scraps of paper since no other paper was made available to him. Although addressed to the eight clergymen, King used the reply to define the freedom movement and the value of a nonviolent campaign. The letter was smuggled out through King’s attorneys and initially published and circulated in Birmingham as a mimeographed copy.

The letter refutes the arguments put forth by the eight clergymen point by point. First, King answers the charge that he is an outsider coming into the Birmingham community. King states that local civil rights invited him into the community as the leader of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. But more importantly, King argues that he had a moral obligation to be there to fight injustice. King writes: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” (Claybourne, 1998, 189). Because we are all connected as humans, he contends that no one in the United States can be an outsider.

Secondly, King admonishes the ministers for criticizing the demonstrations while they failed to express any sympathy for the African-American community and their struggle. He argues that while it is regrettable that the demonstrations are taking place, “it is even more unfortunate that the white power structure has left the Negro community with no alternative” (Claybourne, 1998, 189). King then presents his philosophy of nonviolent action. He says there are four steps to a nonviolent campaign: collection of facts to determine if injustice exists, negotiation, self-purification, and direct action. Obviously, injustice existed in Birmingham, and the African-American leaders had tried to negotiate, but this did not lead to any positive change for African-Americans in the city. In preparation for direct action, leaders organized a series of workshops to train the community to take nonviolent action. This included accepting suffering without retaliation. King justifies direct action as a means to negotiation. The demonstrations would create tension which would force white leader to confront the situation. He writes: “I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth” (Claybourne, 1998, 191).
Next, King answers the charge that the demonstrations were untimely. Birmingham had just finished an election and Albert Boutwell was elected mayor. Boutwell was a segregationist, but some thought he would be more moderate than the previous administration. The ministers wanted the African-American community to give the new administration more time to deal with their grievances. But King argues that a change in administration does not necessarily mean a change in philosophy. African-Americans had suffered injustices for over 300 years and they could wait no longer.

The ministers urged the African-American community to “peacefully obey” the decisions of the courts. This is only a brief mention in the public statement, but King spends a great deal of time answering this charge. King understands the importance of following the law. However, he makes a clear distinction between a “just” law and an “unjust” law. A just law is one that is in harmony with the moral law or as King says the “law of God”. An unjust law is one that goes against this morality and “degrades human personality” (Claybourne, 1998, 193). Obedience goes beyond a legal responsibility; it is also a moral one. Therefore, King writes, “One has not only a legal but moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws” (Claybourne, 1998, 193). King is not advocating anarchy. He says someone who breaks an unjust law must do so “openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty” (Claybourne, 1998, 194). This is similar to what Gandhi advocated by the use of soul-force or satyagraha. Gandhi said, “He should not do that which he knows to be wrong, and suffer the consequence whatever it may be... If man will only realize that is unmanly to obey laws that are unjust, no man’s tyranny will enslave him” (Parel, 1997, 94).

King expresses his disappointment with the white moderates for their lack of understanding and lack of support for the freedom movement. Later in the letter, he singles out the white churches and their leaders. King felt that the white church leaders had not done enough to support justice in the African-American community.

In the public statement, the eight ministers label the demonstrations as “extreme measures”. King counters by saying that he offers a middle-ground between the indifference of some African-Americans and hatred of others. For example, the black nationalist movement was advocating a more violent approach to the situation. King also says that he finds satisfaction with the label of extremist. He invokes the names of other so-called extremists such as Jesus, Amos, Martin Luther, Lincoln and Jefferson.

King ends the letter by addressing the ministers’ praise of the Birmingham police. King presents multiple examples of police brutality. He acknowledges that at times the police force did use restraint when dealing with demonstrators. However, King states that the moral actions of the police were for an immoral purpose – to uphold segregation- and therefore wrong. King theorized that the police did not want demonstrators to gain more sympathy and therefore changed their tactics. However the threat of violence with police dogs and water hoses was always present. King emphasizes the bravery of the African-American protestors which the ministers ignored in their statement. This included African-Americans, young and old, who participated in boycotts and demonstrations.
New York State Content Standards:

**English/ Language Arts:**
NYS Standard 1: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for information and understanding.
NYS Standard 3: Students will read, write, listen, and speak for critical analysis and evaluation.

**Social Studies:**
NYS Standard 5
Civics, Citizenship, and Government

Use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the necessity for establishing governments; the governmental system of the U.S. and other nations; the U.S. Constitution; the basic civic values of American constitutional democracy; and the roles, rights, and responsibilities of citizenship, including avenues of participation.

**Materials Needed:**
- Excerpts from “Letter from Birmingham Jail”. See Appendix A

**Suggested Teaching Activities:**
- Students read excerpts from “Letter from Birmingham Jail” (appendix A) and answer the following questions: What is it about? (Literal) What does it mean? (Interpretive) What does it matter? (Critical). Letter can be broken down into selections and jigsawed if under time constraints.

  -- Introduce Students to Amnesty International as an organization which uses letter writing as a tool for social justice. Invite students to write a letter using AI urgent action campaign OR have students write a letter protesting a social injustice.

  - View digital story to provide background information on the Birmingham Movement and events leading up to “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

**Bibliography:**


APPENDIX A: Excerpt from “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

Full text version available:


April 16, 1963

MY DEAR FELLOW CLERGymEN:

While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling my present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would have little time for anything other than such correspondence in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine goodwill and that your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I want to try to answer your statements in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms.

I think I should indicate why I am here in Birmingham, since you have been influenced by the view which argues against "outsiders coming in." I have the honor of serving as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, an organization operating in every Southern state, with headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. We have some eighty-five affiliated organizations across the South, and one of them is the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. Frequently we share staff, educational and financial resources with our affiliates. Several months ago the affiliate here in Birmingham asked us to be on call to engage in a nonviolent direct-action program if such were deemed necessary. We readily consented, and when the hour came we lived up to our promise. So I, along with several members of my staff, am here because I was invited here. I am here because I have organizational ties here.

But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns: and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom far beyond my own hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.

Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.

You deplore the demonstrations taking place in Birmingham. But your statement, I am sorry to say, fails to express a similar concern for the conditions that brought about the demonstrations. I
am sure that none of you would want to rest content with the superficial kind of social analysis that deals merely with effects and does not grapple with underlying causes. It is unfortunate that demonstrations are taking place in Birmingham, but it is even more unfortunate that the city's white power structure left the Negro community with no alternative.

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: collection of the facts to determine whether injustices exist; negotiation; self-purification; and direct action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community. Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of brutality is widely known. Negroes have experienced grossly unjust treatment in the courts. There have been more Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to a moratorium on all demonstrations. As the weeks and months went by, we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. A few signs, briefly removed, returned; the others remained.

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are quite right in calling, for negotiation. Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks to so dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. My citing the creation of tension as part of the work of the nonviolent-resister may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word "tension." I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must we see the need for nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood.

The purpose of our direct-action program is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. I therefore concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have yet to engage in a direct-action campaign that was "well timed" in the view of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see, with one of our distinguished jurists, that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

We have waited for more than 340 years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jetlike speed toward gaining political independence, but we stiff creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging dark of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and
brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick and even kill your black brother and sisters; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky, and see her beginning to distort her personality by developing an unconscious bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son who is asking: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tiptoe stance, never quite knowing what to expect next, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you go forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness" then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into the abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical for us consciously to break laws. One may want to ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer lies in the fact that there are two types of laws: just and unjust. I would be the first to advocate obeying just laws. One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws. I would agree with St. Augustine that "an unjust law is no law at all"

Let us consider a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a numerical or power majority group compels a minority group to obey but does not make binding on itself. This is difference made legal. By the same token, a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow and that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.

Let me give another explanation. A law is unjust if it is inflicted on a minority that, as a result of being denied the right to vote, had no part in enacting or devising the law. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up that state's segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout Alabama all sorts of devious methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters, and there are some counties in which, even though Negroes constitute a majority of the population, not a single Negro is registered. Can any law enacted under such circumstances be considered democratically structured?

Sometimes a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I have been arrested on a charge of parading without a permit. Now, there is nothing wrong in having an
ordinance which requires a permit for a parade. But such an ordinance becomes unjust when it is used to maintain segregation and to deny citizens the First Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and protest.

I hope you are able to ace the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law, as would the rabid segregationist. That would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do so openly, lovingly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fan in this purpose they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, in which the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substantive and positive peace, in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open, where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured so long as it is covered up but must be opened with an its ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must be exposed, with all the tension its exposure creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

In your statement you assert that our actions, even though peaceful, must be condemned because they precipitate violence. But is this a logical assertion? Isn't this like condemning a robbed man because his possession of money precipitated the evil act of robbery? Isn't this like condemning Socrates because his unswerving commitment to truth and his philosophical inquiries precipitated the act by the misguided populace in which they made him drink hemlock? Isn't this like condemning Jesus because his unique God-consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to God's will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion? We must come to see that, as the federal courts have consistently affirmed, it is wrong to urge an individual to cease his efforts to gain his basic constitutional rights because the quest may precipitate violence. Society must protect the robbed and punish the robber.

You speak of our activity in Birmingham as extreme. At fist I was rather disappointed that fellow clergymen would see my nonviolent efforts as those of an extremist. I began thinking about the fact that stand in the middle of two opposing forces in the Negro community. One is a force of complacency, made up in part of Negroes who, as a result of long years of oppression, are so drained of self-respect and a sense of "somebodiness" that they have adjusted to segregation; and in part of a few middle class Negroes who, because of a degree of academic and economic security and because in some ways they profit by segregation, have become insensitive to the problems of the masses. The other force is one of bitterness and hatred, and it comes perilously close to advocating violence. It is expressed in the various black nationalist groups that are springing up across the nation, the largest and best-known being Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement. Nourished by the Negro's frustration over the continued existence over
discrimination, this movement is made up of people who have lost faith in America, who have absolutely repudiated Christianity, and who have concluded that the white man is an incorrigible "devil."

I have tried to stand between these two forces, saying that we need emulate neither the "do-nothingism" of the complacent nor the hatred of the black nationalist. For there is the more excellent way of love and nonviolent protest. I am grateful to God that, through the influence of the Negro church, the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle.

If this philosophy had not emerged, by now many streets of the South would I am convinced, be flowing with blood. And I am further convinced that if our white brothers dismiss as "rabble-rousers" and "outside agitators" those of us who employ nonviolent direct action, and if they refuse to support our nonviolent efforts, millions of Negroes will, out of frustration and despair, seek solace and security in black-nationalist ideologies—a development that would inevitably lead to a frightening racial nightmare.

Oppressed people cannot remain oppressed forever. The yearning for freedom eventually manifests itself, and that is what has happened to the American Negro. Something within has reminded him of his birthright of freedom, and something without has reminded him that it can be gained. Consciously or unconsciously, he has been caught up by the Zeitgeist, and with his black brothers of Africa and his brown and yellow brothers of Asia, South America and the Caribbean, the United States Negro is moving with a sense of great urgency toward the promised land of racial justice. If one recognizes this vital urge that has engulfed the Negro community, one should readily understand why public demonstrations are taking place. The Negro has many pent-up resentments and latent frustrations, and he must release them. So let him march; let him make prayer pilgrimages to the city hall; let him go on freedom rides—and try to understand why he must do so. If his repressed emotions are not released in nonviolent ways, they will seek expression through violence; this is not a threat but a fact of history. So I have not said to my people: "Get rid of your discontent." Rather, I have tried to say that this normal and healthy discontent can be channeled into the creative outlet of nonviolent direct action. And now this approach is being termed extremist.

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But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice: "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the Christian gospel: "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan: "I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." And Abraham Lincoln: "This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." And Thomas Jefferson: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal..." So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill three men were crucified. We must never forget that all three were crucified for the same crime---the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. Perhaps the South, the nation and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

There was a time when the church was very powerful in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators" But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment. They were too God intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." By their effort and example they brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contests.

Perhaps I have once again been too optimistic. Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world? Perhaps I must turn my faith to the inner spiritual church, the church within the church, as the true ecclesia and the hope of the world. But again I am thankful to God that some noble souls from the ranks of organized religion have broken loose from the paralyzing chains of conformity and joined us as active partners in the struggle for freedom. They have left their secure congregations and walked the streets of Albany, Georgia, with us. They have gone down the highways of the South on tortuous rides for freedom. Yes, they have gone to jai with us. Some have been dismissed from their churches, have lost the support of their bishops and fellow ministers. But they have acted in the faith that right defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. Their witness has been the spiritual salt that has preserved the true meaning of the gospel in these troubled times. They have carved a tunnel of hope through the dark mountain of disappointment.
I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are at present misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham, ham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America's destiny. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence across the pages of history, we were here. For more than two centuries our forebears labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters while suffering gross injustice and shameful humiliation and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.

Before closing I feel impelled to mention one other point in your statement that has troubled me profoundly. You warmly commended the Birmingham police force for keeping "order" and "preventing violence." I doubt that you would have so warmly commended the police force if you had seen its dogs sinking their teeth into unarmed, nonviolent Negroes. I doubt that you would so quickly commend the policemen if you were to observe their ugly and inhumane treatment of Negroes here in the city jail; if you were to watch them push and curse old Negro women and young Negro girls; if you were to see them slap and kick old Negro men and young boys; if you were to observe them, as they did on two occasions, refuse to give us food because we wanted to sing our grace together. I cannot join you in your praise of the Birmingham police department.

It is true that the police have exercised a degree of discipline in handing the demonstrators. In this sense they have conducted themselves rather "nonviolently" in public. But for what purpose? To preserve the evil system of segregation. Over the past few years I have consistently preached that nonviolence demands that the means we use must be as pure as the ends we seek. I have tried to make clear that it is wrong to use immoral means to attain moral ends. But now I must affirm that it is just as wrong, or perhaps even more so, to use moral means to preserve immoral ends. Perhaps Mr. Connor and his policemen have been rather nonviolent in public, as was Chief Pritchett in Albany, Georgia but they have used the moral means of nonviolence to maintain the immoral end of racial injustice. As T. S. Eliot has said: "The last temptation is the greatest treason: To do the right deed for the wrong reason."

I wish you had commended the Negro sit-inners and demonstrators of Birmingham for their sublime courage, their willingness to suffer and their amazing discipline in the midst of great provocation. One day the South will recognize its real heroes. There will be the James Merediths, with the noble sense of purpose that enables them to face jeering and hostile mobs, and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. There will be the old, oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two-year-old woman in Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride segregated buses, and who responded with ungrammatical profundity to one who inquired about her weariness: "My feets is tired, but my soul is at rest." There will be the young high school and college students, the young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders, courageously and
nonviolently sitting in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience' sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence.

Never before have I written so long a letter. I'm afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts and pray long prayers?

If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having a patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me.

I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty.

Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood,
Martin Luther King, Jr.