Title of Lesson: The Courage of Direct Action through Nonviolence in the Montgomery Bus Boycott

Lesson By: Cara McCarthy

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<th>Grade Level/ Subject Areas:</th>
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<td>Fourth Grade</td>
<td>20-25</td>
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Guiding Questions:

- Is nonviolence courageous? Do you think nonviolence is more or less courageous than violence?
- What was the effect of direct action (the disciplined nonviolent use of the body to protest injustice) on the Montgomery bus boycott?
- Did Martin Luther King, Jr. create the Black Freedom Movement or did the movement create Martin Luther King, Jr.? Use the example of Rosa Parks to explain your thinking.
- Explain how the legacy of Rosa Parks bears witness to many of Martin Luther King Jr’s principles of nonviolence including education, personal commitment and direct action.

Lesson Abstract:
The students will explore the power of nonviolence inspired by Gandhi and disseminated by Dr. Dr. King in the Black Freedom Movement, which demanded equal rights for all humanity regardless of race or ethnicity. They will explore the power of direct action, disciplined nonviolence as practiced by a group of people (individually or en masse) in order to achieve a political/social justice goal. They will explore the impact of individual contributions to the dismantling of segregation through the practice of direct action as illustrated by the historical contribution of Rosa Parks. Her arrest propelled Dr. King and his belief in the philosophy of nonviolent direct action to the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement.

Lesson Content:
Dr. King, the leader of the Black Freedom Movement in the United States of America, advocated and practiced nonviolence in response to the aggressive and violent actions perpetrated by a strict system of segregation. His leadership and the actions of countless African Americans led to the Supreme Court ruling against segregation in Brown vs. Board of Education, 1954, the passage of the Civil Rights Act outlawing discrimination in public places, federal programs and employment, 1964, and the passage of the Voting Rights Act prohibiting states from using literacy tests and other methods to prevent African Americans from voting, 1965. (The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr., Clayborne Carson, p.104, 105) These unprecedented historical changes were achieved through disciplined nonviolent political action (direct action). Dr. King was the chosen leader of a grass roots movement that stood up to a system of oppression and injustice. His story is written in the lives of young, middle-aged, and old people who no longer accepted dehumanization, who spoke out with direct action and who committed to nonviolence.

Dr. King was born to Alberta Williams King, a warm, caring, devout person with a deep...
commitment to the Christian faith and to Martin Luther King Sr., a dynamic, strong and fearless man. Throughout his life Martin Sr. worked as a civil rights activist: he served as President of the NAACP in Atlanta, he refused to ride the city bus after an attack on black people, and he helped to eliminate Jim Crow laws in courthouse elevators. He also served as pastor at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. (Carson, p. 5) He never accepted the brutal system of segregation within which Dr. King was raised. Under segregation black children were not allowed to attend school, eat at a lunch counter, or go to the theater or park with white children. Nor were they allowed to use the same bathrooms, waiting rooms or drinking fountains as white children. However, his parents made it clear that they did not agree with segregation and instilled in Martin a sense of justice and self worth. Martin remembers his mother explaining segregation as a social system, not as a natural order. “She made it clear that she opposed this system and that I must never allow it to make me feel inferior. Then she said the words that almost every Negro hears before he can yet understand the injustice that makes them necessary: “You are as good as anyone.” (Carson, p. 5) Dr. King clearly acknowledges the strength of spirit he derived from growing up with his parents who refused to be dehumanized by segregation and who saw strength and purpose in action.

Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University expanded the foundation of social justice laid by Dr. King’s parents. During his studies at Crozer, Dr. King was introduced to Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence and satyagraha, truth force, by Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University. Gandhi’s nonviolent philosophy introduced Dr. King to previously unimagined possibility. “Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale. Love for Gandhi was a potent instrument for social and collective transformation. It was in this Gandhian emphasis on love and nonviolence that I discovered the method for social reform that I had been seeking.” (Carson, p. 24)

Upon graduating as a Doctor of Theology from Boston University Dr. King accepted a position as the pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery Alabama. While serving as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Church, Dr. King’s philosophy of nonviolence, social justice and social action transformed a bus boycott into a national movement for freedom through the use of direct action. The catalyst for the boycott was the arrest of Rosa Parks. Parks, an African American woman seated in the first seat of the unreserved section of a crowded bus, was told to relinquish her seat and move to the back of the bus for a white male. She refused and was subsequently arrested. Parks’ refusal, often recorded in history as a spontaneous reaction to the injustice and indignity of segregation, is a simplistic rendering of her action. It is important to note Parks’ awareness of the social injustice and dehumanization of segregation and her involvement in civil rights prior to this historic moment. In 1943 Parks was elected secretary of her NAACP chapter. In 1945 Parks registered to vote, for the third time. Parks was failed by the administrator of the literacy test, a requirement for African Americans who wanted to register, twice. On her third attempt Parks wrote down her answers on a separate slip of paper in case she had to prove herself. (www.montgomerybusboycott.com) Parks was not only aware of the oppression of segregation; she was also an active participant in her emancipation. The possibility for social action or social inaction exists in each one of us. Parks nurtured her possibility for action and on this day in Montgomery Alabama, at this moment, her sense of dignity and justice nurtured by her consciousness and awareness precipitated her refusal to be
dehumanized. “Parks was the third woman in 1955 to refuse to give up her seat, but the first that E.D. Dixon, former head of the local NAACP, thought was the right symbol for a legal challenge. Middle-aged, quiet, respectable and pleasant, Parks was not susceptible to the character assassination that Nixon knew would come.”

It is a little known but revealing fact that Parks was not the only African American arrested for refusing to move to the back of the bus. In 1955, a 15 year old student named Claudette Colvin refused to move to the rear of the bus. Colvin struggled with the police officers as they forcibly removed her from the bus. The police record indicates that she kicked and scratched the arresting officers. The arrest of Parks and her representation by Nixon, unlike Colvin, sparked an unprecedented mass movement of direct action in Montgomery Alabama. Park’s arrest prompted the Women’s Political Council, led by their president Jo Ann Robinson, to organize a boycott of the Montgomery buses. Flyers were handed out in the community and people were urged to stay off of the buses.

Word of the boycott was also spread through the ministers of Montgomery who had gathered at the invitation of Dr. King at the Dexter Avenue Church. The ministers arranged for a community meeting to encourage people to commit to the boycott. The forces of social change and justice intersected with Dr. King’s life at this moment in history. On the night of the Montgomery bus boycott meeting at the Dexter Avenue Church Dr. King gave a speech that inspired a movement. Dr. King’s words gave a voice to the voiceless, transformed a boycott into an act of moral courage for social justice and equality. Dr. King’s previous education in Gandhian nonviolence and social justice theology provided a framework from which King would develop his own philosophy of nonviolence for the Black Freedom Movement. King’s philosophy of nonviolence in six steps requires a gathering of information, education of the oppressed and the oppressors, a personal commitment to nonviolence and the goals of the movement, negotiation with the oppressors, direct action and reconciliation. The Montgomery bus boycott lasted for over a year. The success of the movement depended on the fortitude and commitment of the African American community. The community organized, educated, communicated and worked together to provide rides, support and spiritual sustenance. They educated themselves in the practice of direct action as defined by Dr. King: “We had no alternative except to prepare for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community.”

The Black Freedom Movement led by Dr. King teaches us about the power of nonviolence and the power of the individual to precipitate change. Martin Luther King’s adherence to the philosophy of nonviolence was shared and supported by many of the prominent leaders of the African American community. Direct action through nonviolence propelled a local movement to the national stage because of its power. The dignity inherent in nonviolent action rips the mask from the oppressor revealing the dehumanization of oppressive laws, words and actions. When violence is met with nonviolence the indignity and inhumanity of the oppressor is exposed. The refusal of Parks is a lesson in individual power, individual responsibility and the interconnectedness of social change. Parks was not the first black person to refuse to move to the back of the bus; in 1955 she was the third. But, at this moment in history Park’s refusal was the catalyst for change. Nonviolence is an active engaged philosophy of empowerment and the Black Freedom Movement bears witness to its power.
Massachusetts State Content Standards:

**Social Studies**
4.15.B: Describe the diverse nature of the American People by identifying the distinctive contributions to American culture of African Americans.

**Language Arts**
4.D.4 Ask and answer questions to learn new information relevant to the task or topic of discussion.
4.D.5 Follow specific tasks and meet timelines for group work.
4.D.6 Identify and explain points of agreement and disagreement during or after a discussion.

Materials Needed:

Suggested Teaching Activities:
- Write a poem for two voices from the point of view of Parks and the point of view of the bus driver. Read the poems and discuss.
- Identify an unjust policy or law within the school or local community. Use the Montgomery Bus boycott as an organizational model and create a plan of action using King’s six steps of nonviolence.
- Read and study the arrest of Colvin and Parks. Compare and contrast her arrest and that of Parks. What lessons can we learn about a social justice struggle from these two historical figures?

Bibliography:

**Books**


**Websites**


7/24/09 [http://www.cmvet.org/nars/freemanj.htm](http://www.cmvet.org/nars/freemanj.htm)