

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Challenge Unjust Laws through Nonviolent Acts of Civil Disobedience

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) was an American minister and leader in the civil rights movement.

Martin Luther King, Jr. coupled Christian teachings with Gandhi's thinking on non-violent resistance. King advocates civil disobedience of discriminatory laws as part of an effort to combat racism and to improve the status of African-Americans. Through their nonviolent actions, they can draw attention to the injustice of the law which they resist, create tension in the community, and force the oppressors to negotiate. But the protesters must be willing to endure such consequences of their disobedience as arrest and punishment.

My dear Fellow Clergymen,

While confined here in the Birmingham City jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all of the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else 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 your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms. . . .

In any nonviolent campaign there are four basic steps: (1) Collection of the facts to determine whether injustices are alive (2) Negotiation (3) Self-purification and (4) Direct Action. We have gone through all of these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying of the fact that racial injustice engulfs this community.

Birmingham is probably the most thoroughly segregated city in the United States. Its ugly record of police brutality is known in every section of this country. Its unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality. There have been more unsolved bombings of Negro homes and churches in Birmingham than any city in this nation. These are the hard, brutal and unbelievable facts. On the basis of these conditions Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the political leaders consistently refused to engage in good faith negotiation.

Then came the opportunity last September to talk with some of the leaders of the economic community. In these negotiating sessions certain promises were made by the merchants—such as the promise to remove the humiliating racial signs from the stores. On the basis of these promises Rev. Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to call a moratorium on any type of demonstrations. As the weeks and months unfolded we realized that we were the victims of a broken promise. The signs remained. Like so many experiences of the past we were confronted with blasted hopes, and the dark shadow of a deep disappointment settled upon us. So we had no alternative except that of preparing for direct action, whereby we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and national community. We were not unmindful of the difficulties involved. So we decided to go through a process of self-purification. We started having workshops on nonviolence and repeatedly asked ourselves the questions, "Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?" "Are you able to endure the ordeals of jail?" . . .

You may well ask, "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. I just referred to the creation of tension as a part of the work of the nonviolent resister. This may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word tension. I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that 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 see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men to rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. So the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. We, therefore, concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in the tragic attempt to live in monologue rather than dialogue. . . .

One of the basic points in your statement is that our acts are untimely. . . . We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was "well timed" according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have

heard the words "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts 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, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an air-tight 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 little eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: "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" and your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted at night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are 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 an abyss of injustice where they experience the blackness of corroding despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

Martin Luther King, Jr.

From Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham City Jail."

MALCOLM X

Use Violence in the Fight against Injustice But Only in Self-Defense

Malcolm X (1925–1965) was an African-American political activist, speaker, and essayist.

Malcolm X rejected Christianity because he believed it to be a tool of oppression. He first turned to Black Nationalism as espoused by Elijah Muhammad, but later in his life embraced Islam which he felt was truly a colorblind religion. When he was affiliated with Black Nationalism, Malcolm X urged African-Americans to think of the white man as the devil and argued for black separatism. After his sojourns to Mecca to learn the ways of traditional Muslims, he abandoned separatism and came to see the demand for an end to racial discrimination as part of a call for universal human rights. Malcolm X did advocate that African-Americans turn to violence but only sanctioned the use of violence for self-defense. Besides his interest in assisting his people in affirming their worth in a racist society, Malcolm X developed an agenda for advancing the interests of African-Americans through the power of the vote.

Malcolm: You're out of your mind if you don't think that there's a racist element in the State Department. I'm not saying that everybody in the State Department is a racist but I'm saying they've sure got some in there—a whole lot of them in there. They've got them in powerful positions in there. This is the element that became worried about the changing Negro mood and the changing Negro behavior, especially if that mood and that behavior became one of what they call violence. By violence they only mean when a black man protects himself against the attacks of a white man. This is what they mean by violence. They don't mean what you mean. Because they don't even use the word violence until someone gives the impression that you're about to explode. When it comes time for a black man to explode they call it violence. But white people can be exploding against black people all day long, and it's never called violence. I even have some of you come to me and ask me, am I for violence? I'm the victim of violence, and you're the victim of violence. But you've been so victimized by it that you can't recognize it for what it is today.

HARYOU-ACT Forum New York.
December 12, 1964

HOW TO GET ALLIES

Malcolm X went to England on December 3, 1964, to participate in a debate sponsored by the Oxford Union Society and presented over television by the British Broadcasting Corporation. The question debated was "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice, moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue," a theme that had aroused heated controversy when it was propounded earlier in 1964 by Senator Barry Goldwater, the conservative Republican candidate for president. There were three speakers on each side, Malcolm being the final speaker for the affirmative. Despite continued efforts, we were unable to get more than a fragment of the transcript. . . .

Malcolm: My reason for believing in extremism, intelligently directed extremism, extremism in defense of liberty, extremism in quest of liberty, is because I firmly believe in my heart that the day that the black man takes an uncompromising step and realizes that he's within his rights, when his own freedom is being jeopardized, to use any means necessary to bring about his freedom or put a halt to that injustice, I don't think he'll be by himself. I live in America where there are only 22 million blacks, against probably 160 million whites. One of the reasons why I'm in no way reluctant or hesitant to do whatever is necessary to see that blacks do something to protect themselves is I honestly believe that the day they do, many whites will have more respect for them, and there will be more whites on their side than are now on their side with these little wishywashy love-thy-enemy approaches that they've been using up to now. And if I'm wrong, then you are racialsists.

From Malcolm X, By Any Means Necessary, second edition.

Here is what I wrote . . . from my heart:

"Never have I witnessed such sincere hospitality and the spirit of true brotherhood as is practiced by people of all colors and races here in this Ancient Holy Land, the home of Abraham, Muhammad, and all the other prophets of the Holy Scriptures. For the past week, I have been utterly speechless and spellbound by the graciousness I see displayed all around me by people of all colors.

"I have been blessed to visit the Holy City of Mecca. I have made my seven circuits around the Ka'ba, led by a young Mutawaf named Muhammad. I drank water from the well of Zem Zem. I ran seven times back and forth between the hills of Mt. Al-Safa and Al-Marwah. I have prayed in the ancient city of Mina, and I have prayed on Mt. Arafat.

"There were tens of thousands of pilgrims, from all over the world. They were of all colors, from blue-eyed blonds to black-skinned Africans. But we were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a

spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and the non-white.

"America needs to understand Islam because this is the one religion that erases from its society the race problem. Throughout my travels in the Muslim world, I have met, talked to, and even eaten with people who in America would have been considered 'white'—but the 'white' attitude was removed from their minds by the religion of Islam. I have never before seen sincere and true brotherhood practiced by all colors together, irrespective of their color. . . .

"They called me 'the angriest Negro in America.' I wouldn't deny that charge. I spoke exactly as I felt. 'I believe in anger. The Bible says there is a time for anger.' They called me 'a teacher, a fomenter of violence.' I would say point blank, 'That is a lie. I'm not for wanton violence, I'm for justice. I feel that if white people were attacked by Negroes—if the forces of law prove unable, or inadequate, or reluctant to protect those whites from those Negroes—then those white people should protect and defend themselves from those Negroes, using arms if necessary. And I feel that when the law falls to protect Negroes from whites' attack, then those Negroes should use arms, if necessary, to defend themselves.

"Malcolm X Advocates Armed Negroes!"

What was wrong with that? I'll tell you what was wrong. I was a black man talking about physical defense against the white man. The white man can lynch and burn and bomb and beat Negroes—that's all right: "Have patience" . . . "The customs are entrenched" "Things are getting better.

Well, I believe it's a crime for anyone who is being brutalized to continue to accept that brutality without doing something to defend himself. If that's how "Christian" philosophy is interpreted, if that's what Gandhian philosophy teaches, well, then, I will call them criminal philosophies.

I tried in every speech I made to clarify my new position regarding white people—"I don't speak against well-meaning, good white people. I have learned that there are some. I have learned that not all white people are racists. I am speaking against and my fight is against the white racists. I firmly believe that Negroes have the right to fight against these racists, by any means that are necessary."

But the white reporters kept wanting me linked with that word "violence." I doubt if I had one interview without having to deal with that accusation.

I am for violence if non-violence means we continue postponing a solution to the American black man's problem—just to avoid violence. I don't go for non-violence if it also means a delayed solution. To me a delayed solution is a non-solution. Or I'll say it in another way. If it must take violence to get the black man his human rights in this country, I'm for violence exactly as you know the Irish, the Poles,

or Jews would be if they were flagrantly discriminated against. I am just as they would be in that case and they would be for violence—no matter what the consequences, no matter who was hurt by the violence. . . .

The cornerstones of this country's operation are economic and political strength and power. The black man doesn't have the economic strength—and it will take time for him to build it. But right now the American black man has the political strength and power to change his destiny overnight.

It was a big order—the organization I was creating in my mind, one which would help to challenge the American black man to gain his human rights, and to cure his mental, spiritual, economic, and political sicknesses. But if you ever intend to do anything worthwhile, you have to start with a worthwhile plan.

Substantially, as I saw it, the organization I hoped to build would differ from the Nation of Islam in that it would embrace all faiths of black men, and it would carry into practice what the Nation of Islam had only preached. . . .

I called a press conference. The microphones stuck up before me. The flashbulbs popped. The reporters, men and women, white and black, representing media that reached around the world, sat looking at me with their pencils and open notebooks.

I made the announcement: "I am going to organize and head a new mosque in New York City known as the Muslim Mosque, Inc. This will give us a religious base, and the spiritual force necessary to rid our people of the vices that destroy the moral fiber of our community.

"Muslim Mosque, Inc. will have its temporary headquarters in the Hotel Theresa in Harlem. It will be the working base for an action program designed to eliminate the political oppression, the economic exploitation, and the social degradation suffered daily by twenty-two million Afro-Americans."

From Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with the assistance of Alex Haley.