

Eleven Days in the Life of Dr. King

Primary Source from a Prison



**TACOMA
ARTS LIVE**

<i>Grades</i>	9 – 12
<i>Core Content Area</i>	Language arts, persuasive writing
<i>Themes</i>	Creating change, speaking to others, fighting for a cause
<i>Materials</i>	Paper and pencil

Background

In this activity, you will form into groups to analyze quotes from Dr. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail. The quotes focus on various topics related to the goals of social justice and the means of working toward them. Depending on which quote you select, you will look at the literary devices Dr. King uses to convey his message, as well as his rationales for both convictions and actions. All groups will also look at whether and how the quotes apply today.

You will work in small groups and then come together for a larger class discussion. Divide into groups of three to four and select a quote with its accompanying questions. Elect a recorder to take notes and a spokesperson to read your quote for the whole class and share your findings.

Lesson Procedure

1.) Analyze Quotes

In this activity, you will form into groups to analyze quotes from Dr. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail. The quotes focus on various topics related to the goals of social justice and the means of working toward them. Depending on which quote you select, you will look at the literary devices Dr. King uses to convey his message, as well as his rationales for both convictions and actions. All groups will also look at whether and how the quotes apply today.

Divide into groups of three to four and select a quote with its accompanying questions. Elect a recorder to take notes and a spokesperson to read your quote for the whole class and share your findings.

2.) Share Your Findings

After working in your small groups come together for a larger class discussion. Each spokesperson will share for their group

Excerpts from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from a Birmingham Jail

To see a complete transcription of the letter follow this [link](#). To see a primary copy of the document, follow this [link](#).

ON THE TIME TO ACT

We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

- According to Dr. King, when is the right time to act against injustice?
- What metaphors does he use to describe the transformation from injustice to justice?
- Based on this reading, how might he respond to the urgent issues of racial inequities in our own time?

ON PROTEST AND DIRECT ACTION

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit ins, marches and so forth? Isn't negotiation a better path?" The purpose of our direct action program is to create a situation so crisis packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation 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 all 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.

- What types of protest activities does Dr. King reference as "direct action"? Are examples of these strategies being used today? Give an example.
- What would Dr. King say to those who call protesting "stirring up trouble"? Would he agree that protest is the cause of trouble?
- According to Dr. King, why is direct action an important element of social change?

ON THE RULE OF LAW & CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE

One may well 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."

- How does Dr. King distinguish between laws to be obeyed and laws to be broken.
- Why does he argue that it is our moral duty to both follow and disobey laws?
- Are there current laws or policies you see as unjust and worthy of being challenged? Why?

ON ALLIES & PRIVILEGE

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action"; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will.

- Dr. King asserts that blatant racism is not the only obstacle to achieving greater racial equity. What types of attitudes does he feel create additional barriers?
 - Are "Order" and "Peace" the same thing in King's eyes? What does he mean by "negative peace" versus "positive peace"?
 - Is this same issue pertinent to our own times? How so?
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ON JUSTICE AND TIME

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."

- Why is Dr. King uninterested in waiting for the "opportune" time to act for change? Does such a thing exist? From whose point of view?
 - How might Dr. King respond to someone who says, "I share your goals, but think you need to be more patient?" Why?
 - What social issues are with us today that might indicate that "justice too long delayed is justice denied?"
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ON INTERCONNECTION

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.

- According to Dr. King, why should people in one place be concerned with injustice in another place, even if it does not affect them directly?
 - Why is it that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere?"
 - If we are connected to even those injustices that do not affect us personally, what is an example of a current issue Dr. King would encourage you to act on – even though it does not impact you directly?
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ON AFRICAN AMERICAN CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE U.S.

We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham 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.

- In what ways and which eras have African Americans contributed to the progress of the United States, according to Dr. King?
 - How might Dr. King respond to the alt-right of today's assertion that the United States is the product of and inheritance of white society?
 - Despite the dark chapters of the past, this passage is essentially one of hope. What are some of the phrases King uses to invoke hope in the face of adversity?
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ON A NATIONAL VISION

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.

- Dr. King wrote these words over fifty years from his cell in a Birmingham jail. Would you argue that the “dark clouds of racial prejudice” have cleared in our country, or do they still hang over our heads?
- The letter cites “fear-drenched communities.” In what ways is fear still being used as a tool for division in today’s political climate?
- King lists “love” and “brotherhood” as stars that will someday shine over this nation. What other conditions or qualities would you include as “stars” to form a constellation of justice over our nation?