

*“Injustice  
anywhere is  
a threat  
to justice  
everywhere.”*

# from Letter from Birmingham Jail

by MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

## Connect to Your Life

**Personal Commitment** What issue do you feel strongly about? How far would you go to support your convictions? Would you speak out, write to Congress, march in a demonstration, or take even stronger measures?

## Build Background

**Defending Civil Disobedience** In 1963 the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., led a massive civil rights campaign in Birmingham, Alabama, involving drives for African-American voter registration and for desegregation in education and housing. During this nonviolent action, King was arrested and imprisoned several times. During one imprisonment, he wrote “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” which has become a classic statement in support of civil disobedience. It was written in response to a published letter by eight local clergymen criticizing King’s actions as “unwise and untimely.” In the part of the letter that follows, King defends his actions by drawing upon the ideas of philosophers, religious scholars, biblical figures, and political thinkers with whom his audience, as clergymen, would have been familiar.

### WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

affiliate	latent
appraisal	provocation
cognizant	retaliating
diligently	segregated
estrangement	statute

## Focus Your Reading

**LITERARY ANALYSIS ALLUSION** An **allusion** is a reference to a person, place, event, or literary work with which the author believes the reader will be familiar. In his letter, King mentions the Boston Tea Party, a well-known event in American history, in which a group of rebels dumped 15,000 pounds of tea into Boston’s harbor to protest the British Tea Act of 1773. This allusion reminds the reader that civil disobedience is a time-honored means of resisting unjust laws. Note other allusions in this letter, and consider why King uses them.

### ACTIVE READING LOGICAL ARGUMENT: DEDUCTION AND INDUCTION

In your own persuasive essays, you likely have used these processes of reasoning:

- When you use **induction**, you begin with specific facts and then reach a general conclusion based on them.
- When you use **deduction**, you begin with a general statement and then infer specific statements from it.

In this letter, King uses induction in the second paragraph to explain why he is in Birmingham. He presents facts about his role in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and then concludes with the general statement “I am here because I have organizational ties here.”

King uses deduction, beginning with the third paragraph, to justify his presence in the city. He begins with the general statement that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Then in three subsequent paragraphs, he gives specific instances of injustices in Birmingham, such as unsolved bombings of African-American homes.

**READER’S NOTEBOOK** Select a passage that appeals to you and identify the process of reasoning used in it. Write notes about King’s general and specific statements.

**Induction:** specific → general      **Deduction:** general → specific



from **LETTER FROM**  
**BIRMINGHAM**  
**JAIL**

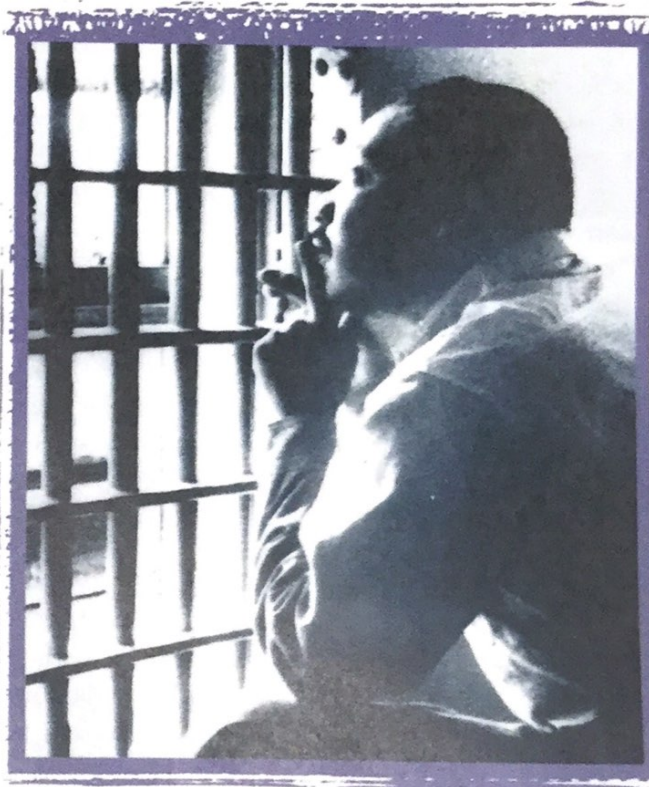
APRIL 16, **1963**

**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 statement 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

Martin Luther King, Jr.



King in a jail cell at the Jefferson County Courthouse in Birmingham.

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

WORDS  
TO  
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**affiliate** (ə-fīl'ē-īt) *n.* a person or organization associated with another



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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 beyond my own hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid.<sup>1</sup>

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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

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deprecate 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 these steps in Birmingham. There can be no gainsaying<sup>2</sup> 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 unsolved bombings of Negro homes and

churches in Birmingham than in any other city in the nation. These are the hard, brutal facts of the case. On the basis of these conditions, Negro leaders sought to negotiate with the city fathers. But the latter consistently refused to engage in good-faith negotiations.

Then, last September, came the opportunity to talk with leaders of Birmingham’s economic community. In the course of the negotiations, certain promises were made by the merchants—for example, to remove the stores’ humiliating racial signs.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of these promises, The Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the leaders of the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights agreed to a moratorium<sup>4</sup> 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.

As in so many past experiences, our hopes had been blasted, and the shadow of deep disappointment settled upon us. 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. Mindful of the difficulties involved, we decided to undertake a process of self-purification. We began a series of workshops on nonviolence, and we repeatedly asked ourselves: “Are you able to accept blows without retaliating?” “Are you able to endure the ordeal of jail?” We decided to schedule our direct-action program for the Easter season, realizing that except for Christmas, this is the main shopping period

1. **Macedonian** (mäs'ĭ-dō'nē-ən) *call for aid*: According to the Bible (Acts 16), a man appeared to the apostle Paul in a vision, calling him to preach in Macedonia (at that time a Roman province north of Greece).
2. **gainsaying**: denying.
3. **racial signs**: signs marking segregated buildings and other facilities.
4. **moratorium** (môr'ə-tôr'ē-əm): temporary stoppage.

WORDS **cognizant** (kŏg'nĭ-zənt) *adj.* aware  
 TO **segregated** (sĕg'rĭ-gā'tĭd) *adj.* separated according to race **segregate** *v.*  
 KNOW **retaliating** (rĭ-tāl'ē-ā'tĭng) *n.* taking revenge **retaliate** *v.*



of the year. Knowing that a strong economic-withdrawal program would be the by-product of direct action, we felt that this would be the best time to bring pressure to bear on the merchants for the needed change.

Then it occurred to us that Birmingham's mayoral election was coming up in March, and we speedily decided to postpone action until after election day. When we discovered that the Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor, had piled up enough votes to be in the runoff, we decided again to postpone action until the day after the runoff so that the demonstrations could not be used to cloud the issues. Like many others, we waited to see Mr. Connor defeated, and to this end we endured postponement after postponement. Having aided in this community need, we felt that our direct-action program could be delayed no longer.

You may well ask: "Why direct action? Why sit-ins,<sup>5</sup> 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 so to 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<sup>6</sup> 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, so must



Birmingham police turn fire hoses on civil rights demonstrators.

we see the need for nonviolent gadflies<sup>7</sup> 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.

One of the basic points in your statement is that the action that I and my associates have taken in Birmingham is untimely. Some have asked: "Why didn't you give the new city administration time to act?" The only answer that I can give to this query is that the new Birmingham administration must be prodded about as much as the outgoing one before it

5. **sit-ins**: peaceful demonstrations in which protesters occupied, and refused to leave, seats in segregated lunch counters and other places of business.

6. **Socrates** (sŏk'rŏ-tēz'): a Greek philosopher of the fifth century B.C.—one of the major influences in the development of Western thought.

7. **gadflies**: critics.





In 1968, civil-rights marchers in Memphis pass National Guard bayonets.

will act. . . . My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. Lamentably, it is a historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr<sup>8</sup> has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.

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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.”

2

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 still creep at horse-and-buggy pace toward gaining a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. Perhaps it is easy for those who

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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, and even kill your black brothers 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<sup>9</sup> 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

✦ Reinhold Niebuhr (rĭn’hōld’ nē’bōōr’): a 20th-century American theologian whose writings deal mainly with moral and social problems.

9. ominous (ōm’ə-nəs): threatening.



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 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,<sup>10</sup> at first glance it may seem rather paradoxical<sup>11</sup> for us consciously to break laws. 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<sup>12</sup> that “an unjust law is no law at all.”

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine whether a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas:<sup>13</sup> An unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal law and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. Segregation, to use the terminology of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber,<sup>14</sup> substitutes an “I-it” relationship for an “I-thou” relationship and ends up relegating

persons to the status of things. Hence segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich<sup>15</sup> has said that sin is separation. Is not segregation an existential<sup>16</sup> expression of man’s tragic separation, his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? Thus it is that I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, for it is morally right; and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances, for they are morally wrong.

**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

10. **the Supreme Court’s . . . public schools:** the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in the case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.
11. **paradoxical** (pär’ə-dök’sī-kəl): self-contradictory.
12. **St. Augustine** (δ’gə-stēn’): a North African bishop of the fourth–fifth centuries, whose writings have been extremely influential throughout the history of Christianity.
13. **St. Thomas Aquinas** (ə-kwī’nəs): a noted medieval philosopher and theologian.
14. **Martin Buber** (bōō’bər): an influential 20th-century Jewish philosopher.
15. **Paul Tillich** (tīl’īk): a German-born American theologian of the 20th century.
16. **existential** (ĕg’zī-stēn’shəl): existing in the real world.

WORDS TO KNOW **diligently** (dīl’ĕ-jənt-lē) *adv.* in a persevering, painstaking manner  
**statute** (stäch’ōōt) *n.* a law  
**estrangement** (ī-strānj’mənt) *n.* separation; alienation



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 see 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.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was evidenced sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar,<sup>17</sup> on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience.

We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was “legal” and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters<sup>18</sup>

did in Hungary was “illegal.” It was “illegal” to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler’s Germany. Even so, I am sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country’s antireligious laws.

I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers. First, I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. 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,<sup>19</sup> 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<sup>20</sup> 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 goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill

17. **the refusal . . . Nebuchadnezzar** (nĕb’ə-kəḏ-nĕz’ər): In the Bible (Daniel 3), Shadrach (shăd’răk), Meshach (mĕ’shăk), and Abednego (ə-bĕḏ’nĭ-gō’) are three Hebrews condemned to death for refusing to worship an idol set up by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. When cast into a fiery furnace, they are miraculously protected from the fire and emerge unharmed.

18. **Hungarian freedom fighters:** Hungarians who participated in a 1956 rebellion against the Communist government of their homeland. (The uprising was crushed by troops sent into Hungary by the Soviet Union.)

19. **the White . . . Klanner:** the member of a group committed to the exclusion and persecution of African Americans and other minorities.

20. **paternalistically** (pə-tŭr’no-lĭs’tĭ-klĕ): in a manner that suggests a father’s claim of protective authority over his children.



C will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail 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 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.

2 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<sup>21</sup> 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. . . .

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*,<sup>22</sup> 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.

21. precipitated (prĭ-sĭp'ĭ-tā'tĭd): brought about; caused.

22. *Zeitgeist* (tsĕit'gĭst) *German*: spirit of the time—the beliefs and attitudes shared by most of the people living in a particular period.

Oppressed people

cannot remain

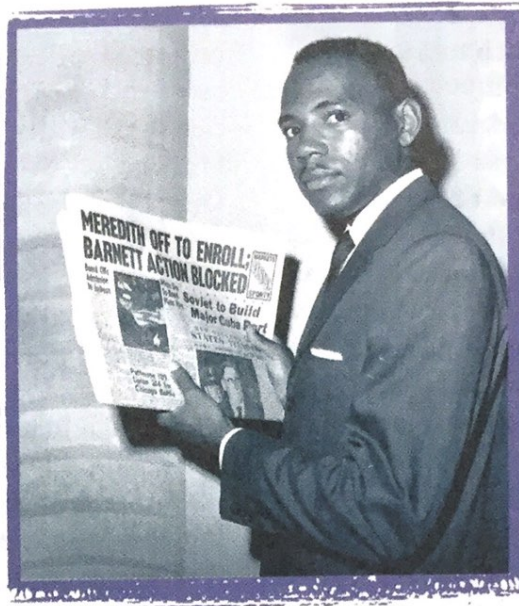
oppressed forever.



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<sup>23</sup> 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<sup>24</sup> an extremist: "Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise, so help me God." And John Bunyan:<sup>25</sup> "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<sup>26</sup> 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



James Meredith during his struggle to enter the University of Mississippi in 1962.

of creative extremists. . . .

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. They will be the James Merediths,<sup>27</sup> 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. They will be 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 feet is tired, but my soul is at rest." They 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

23. **Amos:** a Hebrew prophet whose words are recorded in the Old Testament book bearing his name.
24. **Martin Luther:** a German monk who launched the Protestant Reformation with his condemnations of the wealth and corruption of the 16th-century Roman Catholic Church.
25. **John Bunyan:** a 17th-century English preacher and author of the famous religious allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress*. He was twice imprisoned for unlicensed preaching.
26. **Calvary's hill:** the site of Jesus's crucifixion.
27. **James Merediths:** people like James Meredith, who endured violent opposition from whites to become the first African American to attend the University of Mississippi.

WORDS  
TO  
KNOW

**provocation** (prōv'ə-kā'shən) *n.* something that arouses anger



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<sup>28</sup> beauty.

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

28. scintillating (sĭn'tl-ā'tīng): sparkling.

## LITERARY LINK

### REVOLUTIONARY DREAMS Nikki Giovanni



*On the Subway* (1986), Elizabeth Catlett. Courtesy of Isobel Neal Gallery, Chicago.

i used to dream militant  
dreams of taking  
over america to show  
these white folks how it should be  
5 done  
i used to dream radical dreams  
of blowing everyone away with my perceptive powers  
of correct analysis  
i even used to think i'd be the one  
10 to stop the riot and negotiate the peace  
then i awoke and dug  
that if i dreamed natural  
dreams of being a natural  
woman doing what a woman  
15 does when she's natural  
i would have a revolution



## Literary Analysis

**ALLUSION** An **allusion** is a reference to a historical or literary person, place, or event with which the reader is assumed to be familiar. Many works contain allusions to the Bible, classical mythology, Shakespeare's plays, or other works of literature. By using allusions, writers tap the knowledge and memory of the reader, drawing upon associations already in the reader's mind. For example, readers familiar with the Bible likely will recognize King's allusion to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the three Jews who risked death rather than worship an idol. By alluding to these biblical characters, King emphasizes the civil rights protesters' courage to die for their convictions.

**Cooperative Learning Activity** Work with three classmates to investigate King's allusions to these historical figures: Socrates, the Apostle Paul, Adolf Hitler, and James Meredith. Each member of the group should research one of these people in detail. After you have completed your research, write a note explaining the allusion and telling why you think King includes it in his argument. Pool your notes and share them with other groups.