

Jonnie Fabrizio

Dr. Jill Swiencicki

ENG 259-01

January 14, 2011

Courage of a King

Challenging an issue in society can be a difficult task which involves a purpose and position, as well as methods and materials to support one's cause. On April 16, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. wrote an influential letter titled, "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." The letter is addressed to his "fellow clergymen", however intentionally Luther wanted this letter to be read by all (342). This note addresses the issues surrounding the segregation in the United States, specifically Birmingham, Alabama. King purposely writes this letter in order to defend his actions, gather support from the community, and educate the public on why the situation needs to be dealt with with such urgency.

King was a man whose actions toward change were effective. He used peace in order to make his objective heard, as well as an effective manner to get things done. Unfortunately, King was unable to live to see the significance of his strides toward equality. King explains that he chose Birmingham to focus his project toward unity and respect in this nation because this was known to be the most segregated city in the country (343). The method in which King defends this claim is by sharing the brutal crimes in which the city has endured. King describes the bombings of homes, police brutality, and the contradictory politics toward African Americans.

He demonstrates his reasoning to seek social justice when he explains, “When you have seen vicious mobs lynch...hate filled policemen curse, kick and even kill...your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society” (345). This is the background that not only King has seen, but many Americans have seen and have chosen to ignore. Allocating these threats of violence to the African American community has a strong persuasive effect leading people to join this civil rights movement.

Seeing or even knowing about these crimes is something no American should endure. Sadly our society faced this issue in its past, but there has been numerous cultural heroes who have made a stand to challenge the issues. In his letter, King makes comparison to historical events in order to reason with his actions. He metaphorically parallels his actions of peaceful protest to that of Paul, the disciple to Jesus Christ in the eighth century (343). King forwards this information to the reader in order to relate his doings to doings of good through peaceful means. He accepts graciously that many characterize him as an “extremist” because throughout our history, many extremist have accomplished great things. Again he biblically notes the works of Paul, one whom shared the gospel of Jesus. He recognizes Jesus and of his belief that we should love and pray for our enemies. King gives more examples including Martin Luther’s involvement in the Protestant Reformation, or Thomas Jefferson’s and his wordings in the Declaration of independence (350). King knows that what he is doing, and his punishment in a Birmingham jail is not a punishment whatsoever; rather, this is one step toward greatness.

King mentions gentlemen by the name of Mr. Boutwell and Mr. Conner who were running in an upcoming election during the time in which this letter was written. Both were

segregationists in which King argues against, though Mr. Boutwell was the more favorable candidate. However King explains that if Mr. Boutwell wins the election, changes in civil rights would only occur if the people of Birmingham act and pressure him for change.

Famous thinkers have inspired many people throughout history. King agrees with St. Augustine that “An unjust law is no law at all” (346). He feels that going against unjust laws is completely fair, justifiable, and needs to be done. At the time this letter was written, unjust laws filled communities around the nation. King wanted unity to exist in the United States. He believed that if you are an American citizen, you should not feel as if you are an outsider.

King specifically authorizes and borrows ideas from Socrates as well. Socrates has the idea that by building tension, people can grow beneficially. King utilizes this idea when he tries to prove that tension is not necessarily a bad thing. He saw tension as an advantage for putting pressure on the strides toward equality. King confidently states, “The purpose of direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that you inevitably open the door to negotiation” (344).

The urgency to transform society to becoming more equal drove King to powerful actions. King suggests that, “We must use time creatively, and forever realize time is always ripe to do right” (348). With all the violence and oppression that African Americans are enduring, King urges that this was the time to take action. If one does not change how things are now, then they will forever be the same, if not worse. King argues the civility of Elijah Muhammad’s Muslim movement and how their frustrations with unjustness lead them to revolt as a black nationalist party (349). This group had completely lost faith in Christianity, the United States, and overall compared white people to the devil. Though King encourages people

to take action, he does not believe in the extremes that Elijah Muhammad's Muslim movement takes. He promotes rather actions of non-violence.

This letter has been so well remembered in our country's history because of King's eloquent rhetoric that pushed along strides toward equality. Though our nation still experiences racism and segregation, it has been significantly reduced with thanks to people such as King, Rosa Parks, Booker T. Washington, and W.E.B. De Bois. As a country based upon freedom and equality, we should take King's words that, "We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right" (348). Without this mentality, not only the United States, but the whole world would never stand up against what is wrong in order to make right.

Works Cited

King Jr., Martin Luther. "Letter From a Birmingham Jail." *Dissent In America*. New Jersey.
Pearson Education, Inc., 2008. 342-350. Print.