

LETTER FROM A BIRMINGHAM JAIL

Told by Andrew Young

Adapted from his book *An Easy Burden*

After some initial setbacks in the struggle for civil rights, some said we were beaten, but in fact we were more ready than ever to wage our nonviolent campaign. So we set our sights on the toughest town in the South—Birmingham, Alabama.

The Birmingham campaign was a turning point for the national Civil Rights Movement. It was also a turning point for our leader. Until then, Martin Luther King Jr. had always been cautious, even reluctant, about being a leader. It had been thrust upon him, and occasionally he would try to retreat from it all. But in Birmingham, I believe he finally came to accept that he could never walk away from the awesome responsibility that had fallen upon his shoulders.

Shortly after our campaign began, the city of Birmingham got a state court injunction against demonstrations. We knew that marches would result in certain imprisonment.

One morning about a dozen of us were squeezed into the living room of Martin's hotel room. We were facing a difficult decision and our unity of purpose began to fray as each person argued from his or her own viewpoint. "Martin, you've done all you can do here," one said. "Forget Birmingham for a while." Another one explained, "You can't put more people in jail now. We can't bail out the ones already in there.

Sending more people to jail is just out of the question.”

In this atmosphere of utter depression, Martin said very little. He just listened, as was his habit in high-pressure situations. Suddenly, he rose and retired into the rear bedroom. When he was gone for a while, the discussion finally slowed to a halt. Almost on cue, Martin and Ralph Abernathy came out dressed in denim jackets and jeans, our “work” uniform in Birmingham, which we wore to dramatize our solidarity with working people. “The only thing for me to do is go to jail, and join those people already there,” Martin said. “And stay there until people see what we’re dealing with. Those who’re going with me, get ready.”

Martin’s decision to go to jail on Good Friday, 1963, made it possible for us to sustain both the Birmingham campaign and the movement throughout the South. But of course, we didn’t know that yet. The march on that Good Friday did not last long. Martin, Ralph, and some fifty others strode past Kelly Ingram Park. A huge crowd of black citizens gathered around the march. We were stunned by the aggressiveness of the police, who began to push and shove the marchers, including Martin, onto the paddy wagon. “Don’t rough up Dr. King like that,” the bystanders screamed at the police.

Martin led the marchers along the sidewalk and stopped for red lights; still the marchers were arrested for parading without a permit and their bonds were set as if their offense were first-degree murder. One of the intimidating tactics used by the city of Birmingham was to set the bond at one thousand dollars or more for each marcher. This was incredibly high for what was essentially jaywalking. Martin was placed in an isolation cell, and no one was allowed to see him for a day or so.

He couldn't even make a call to his wife, Coretta, who had just given birth to their fourth child.

Martin did not like being in jail: it was a cross he had agreed to bear, but it made him very moody. So he put tremendous pressure on us to maximize the impact and significance of his time in jail. "You must resume demonstrations immediately," he said. "Don't let the local support committee stop you. We have got to keep the pressure on Birmingham."

Despite Martin's impatience, the situation was already changing for the better. The news and the images of the Good Friday arrests were sinking in. Photographs of Martin and Ralph Abernathy being hustled off to jail were shown on television and published all over the world. The reaction was tremendous. For the first time, the Birmingham campaign was being taken seriously. It was not long before we began receiving pledges of support from all over.

That same weekend, singer Harry Belafonte, a committed supporter of our cause and a close friend, was hard at work in New York securing new funds to replenish the critically short bail money. By Monday, Harry reported he had raised fifty thousand dollars and that more would be forthcoming. To us this sounded like a miracle.

From his cell, the week after Easter, Martin began what would become his famous "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." He wrote in the margins of newspapers, and on the back of legal papers, and slipped us the text bit by bit. In this letter, he provided us with comprehensive, far-ranging answers to all the objections to our campaign. He also articulated the religious basis for the nonviolent protest movement in

Christian theology. Martin's letter answered the charges of "ill-timing" by reminding our critics that blacks had waited more than three hundred years for justice in America; we could afford to wait no longer. It has always moved me to think about what Martin was able to create out of what most people would consider a painful period of deprivation.

Within a few weeks, thousands of copies of Martin's letter were distributed around the country, published in national and European journals, and quoted from as the rationale behind the Civil Rights Movement. This letter helped establish a strong moral and intellectual basis not only for our struggle in Birmingham, but for all subsequent movement campaigns in the South. It has since become a classic in American literature.

The intense media attention, combined with the effective economic boycott, began to put a lot of pressure on the power structure in Birmingham. For nearly two months, black citizens purchased very little but food and medicine. The lack of retail sales during the Easter season was visibly hurting our targeted stores, just as we had hoped. In Birmingham, blacks spent a lot of money downtown, but businessmen didn't seem to appreciate just how much until their black patronage was withdrawn.

Part of what made Martin's leadership so powerful was his ability to put our movement, and our trials in Birmingham, into its proper context as a world movement. He was able to make us feel as if we were more than our daily selves, more than we had been—a part of a beautiful and glorious vision that was enabling us to transcend ourselves—to lift the people to another place so that they could almost feel themselves

moving. Each night of the campaign, after Martin concluded his speeches to tumultuous applause, we would all rise, join hands, and sing “We Shall Overcome.”

We shall overcome
We shall overcome
We shall overcome some day
Oh, deep in my heart I do believe
We shall overcome some day.

As usual, Martin was right. And the work we did in Birmingham did help launch a worldwide movement. The model we developed for nonviolent social change in this small Southern town has since been used to help campaigns for human rights and freedom in Poland, South Africa, and other countries. Trusting in Martin’s wisdom helped us persist in the struggle. Now, looking back, it’s very rewarding to know that the suffering we lived through was not in vain. It was all an integral part of God’s plan for a better tomorrow.

In the spirit of Dr. King’s commitment to service, the King Holiday in January is now a national day of service, interracial cooperation, and youth anti-violence initiatives. People and organizations are keeping the “Dream” alive by opening their hearts and offering their hands to bring diverse peoples together. Call the Office of Public Liaison at the Corporation for National Service at 202-606-5000. You can learn more about Dr. King’s life and his works by visiting www.thekingcenter.org.