

January 8, 1984

Martin Luther King's birthday is approaching, and as part of the recognition of this I have been asked to speak about him at a meeting of high school students this afternoon.

As part of my preparation for this assignment I reread King's famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail." It is useful to reflect upon the different impact a great document has on one after several years have elapsed since its first reading.

The letter from the Birmingham Jail is addressed to a group of clergymen—a half dozen or so bishops from various denominations, a couple of rabbis, and two or three other clerics. This was a group of moderate religious leaders, certainly not racist, and certainly not the sort of opponents Martin Luther King and his followers had had to face in the likes of Birmingham's notorious Sheriff, "Bull" Connor, and others.

Yet these clergymen had taken out an advertisement in a Birmingham newspaper, making an appeal that street demonstrations be ended, civic peace restored, and the points at issue between black and white citizens be negotiated among local people themselves, and, if necessary, adjudicated in the courts. The advertisement regretted the presence in Birmingham, Alabama of outside agitators who had come all the way from Atlanta, Georgia.

The immediate point at issue, not mentioned in the clergymen's advertisement, was the practice on the part of merchants and businessmen in Birmingham's central area of posting "whites only" signs in their windows. This and other practices had the effect of causing Birmingham to be one of the most rigidly segregated cities in the South.

Martin Luther King's letter explained for these clerics the far-reaching spiritual, psychological, and practical implications of segregation, and it outlined the principles of nonviolent action, explaining why, at last, after much negotiation, it was necessary to carry the witness to new levels of activism.

In retrospect, two things are striking about the letter. One, of course, is that Dr. King felt it necessary to justify in fourteen or sixteen pages public demonstrations against "whites only" signs in shop windows.

Another is the fact that in the course of his text, Martin Luther King cites Paul of Tarsus, Socrates, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, Jesus of Nazareth, Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, the prophet Amos, Martin Luther, John Bunyan, and others whom I cannot now remember.

Now these various citations occur in the text almost in passing, and not in any spirit of pretentiousness or false learning, as if the writer were seeking to bury the bishops in debate by citing authoritative sources they dared not refute. Rather, Martin Luther King seems to use the examples of these great spirits much as we would use the multiplication table to get through the local supermarket, as if employing some resource which is natural, close at hand, and which has the character of being a kind of "second nature." Indeed, Martin Luther King was writing in a jail cell in the margins of old newspapers, and had no research resources at his fingertips.

I think it is interesting that the person who in our own time and in our own culture allows us to experience a closeness with spiritual greatness is a person for whom these other great prophets and sages were an everyday presence, something close at hand, something which is a part of everyday life, something naturally to be engaged as the occasion arose. And rather than being dragged himself to the level of the faint-hearted clergy, or the the level of vengefulness of his frankly racist opponents, Martin Luther King responded on the same level of clarity and truth which has characterized all the greatest moments of human spiritual realization.

Somehow, out of the turbulence of our lives, which certainly pales when compared to that which faced Martin Luther King, we, too, must find that quiet place where the great treasury of wisdom which is at our fingertips can become part of our being, like the multiplication table, and so that this treasure will color and raise up the quality of our responses when we encounter in our own lives the sorts of things which "whites only" signs represented in King's. Let us, in our silence, resolve to strengthen our bonds of kinship with Martin Luther King and with those who nourished him.