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Samuel Lawson's Essay

A Letter From A Birmingham Jail

On April 16th 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King in a Birmingham, Alabama jail wrote a letter to eight White clergymen who had called his activities "unwise and untimely." Because Dr. King believed these men were sincere and of genuine goodwill, their criticisms were felt to be worthy of a response. Dr. King had been jailed for protesting segregation and racial injustice in Birmingham. In this letter, he was calling on his fellow clergymen to support his efforts in the pursuit of equal justice, and basic civil rights.

It is an interesting time to grow up as a young African American male in America. It is often like living in two different worlds. In one world I am told that I can be anything that I wish to be and have all that my heart desires. In this world I must simply study hard, be of good character, and be a moral citizen. In the other world, I know that no matter what I do, even if I meet all the goals of my first world, I can be treated as less than others, simply because of the color of my skin. In this world are terms like driving while black and shopping while black. These are terms that are used when unequal and unfair treatment is provided to those who are look like me. In some of these situations, lives are lost and in most, disrespect and indifference are given to people of color. Dr. King in his letter described how being African American as being "Harried by day and haunted by night" by this fact, "living constantly at tip-toe stance, never quite knowing what to expect, and are plagued with inner fears and outer resentments, when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of nobodiness."

I say to all that this is not right, and it is time to treat African Americans and all Americans equally in the same situations. There should not be two worlds for anyone. It is time for equality for all. I am a black male teenager who has been on this earth for fourteen years and I can look at what is happening and see that this is wrong. I would think that those who have been around much longer than I and those who follow history should know that these things are simply wrong. I am amazed that today we as Americans, are still not willing to admit that ALL men are created equally, and that equality is a God given right for ALL people.

This quest for equality has gone on for quite a while and it seems that we, as Americans would stand up for legitimate change. Adults seem to be very good at making excuses to not change but it seems that they are also very good at passing their unwillingness to change on to their descendants. It has been hundreds of years of inequality in America. There have been many calls for equality throughout the years but true equality has not been achieved; that is why my two worlds exist. The time for equality is NOW! In the letter, Dr. King said "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

When I think back on situations where positive changes have occurred for people of my culture, it has been slow and often very painful. I can think of no better example to use to support my thought than the Black Lives Matter movement which, as Dr. King advised "we would present our very bodies as a means of laying our case before the conscience of the local and the national community." These protests brought about unprecedented awareness of systemic racism and police brutality against African Americans, but at what cost? Individuals who only wanted to protest racial injustice were treated very badly to say the least. Protesters were jailed, injured, and even killed. Just for asking for change.

Dr. King said from his letter from the Birmingham jail made many good points. One of the main statements that stood out for me was when Dr. King quoted Abraham Lincoln, "That this nation cannot survive as half slave and half free." Though my ancestors were slaves at one time, they are no more, and the bonds of slavery must be completely removed. We cannot be treated as second class. Especially as African Americans played a large part in building this nation. This is our country and as full citizens, we should be treated as if we are. We should not have to beg to be treated equally in all areas because we have earned equality. The Declaration of Independence says that we hold these truths to be evident that all men are created equally. Yet as Dr. Martin Luther King said in his letter, "Abused and scorned though we may be our destiny is tied up with America's destiny."

I also look at the recent activities of America. After the call for police reform by the Black Lives Matter organization and the many marches that occurred, there seemed to be some flashbacks from the past. I noted that those who marched were often called thugs and though they were actually exercising their rights as citizens, they were often criminalized. This also happened to Dr. King and those who marched in the Montgomery boycotts. In both situations those who were wronged were chastised because they moved to a direct action to state their message. They were peaceful and exercising their rights. Both the Montgomery boycotters and the Black Lives Matter group were presenting their bodies a sacrifice for the local and national cause, knowing they could be and probably

would be, beaten or jailed. So many years have pasted but why is there no change. That is a portion of my world where I cannot be whatever I want to be. In that world they look at the demonstrations and demonstrators as evil but they do not seriously look at the actions that brought about the demonstrations. In that world Black Lives Matter demonstrators are treated very different from those who march on Washington to support the current president. In that world they are allowed with their privilege to destroy and vandalize. They are not arrested , injured, or killed.

I will choose to continue to strive to help all of us get to live in one world. The world of equality. I am only fourteen, but I can see the need for true equality and I will work to make it so. I will work to assure that the Black boys that come after me can live in one world; one that is equal. I will not work just for Black boys like myself but for all because as Dr. King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

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