

Excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from the Birmingham City Jail

You may well ask, "Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that 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. I just referred to the creation of tension as a part of the work of the nonviolent resister. This may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word tension. I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of **constructive**ⁱ nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the **bondage**ⁱⁱ of myths and half-truths to the **unfettered**ⁱⁱⁱ realm of creative analysis and objective **appraisal**^{iv}, we must see the need of having nonviolent **gadflies**^v 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. So the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. We, therefore, concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in the tragic attempt to live in monologue rather than dialogue...

We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our **pending**^{vi} national **elegy**^{vii} into a creative **psalm**^{viii} of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

ⁱ constructive – serving a useful purpose

ⁱⁱ bondage – slavery

ⁱⁱⁱ unfettered – not limited or restrained by anyone or anything

^{iv} appraisal – a careful assessment and consideration of something

^v gadfly – an annoying person, especially one who provokes others into action by criticism; a fly that bites other animals

^{vi} pending – waiting to be decided or dealt with

^{vii} elegy – a sad funeral song or poem for the dead

^{viii} psalm – a sacred song or hymn

Name: _____ Date: _____

1. As explained by Martin Luther King Jr., what is the purpose of nonviolent direct action?

- A It creates an environment of tension in which no one is willing to negotiate.
- B It prevents negotiations from taking place.
- C It dramatizes an issue so that it can no longer be ignored.
- D It delays negotiation until people are ready to confront an issue.

2. Which statement correctly describes the structure of this excerpt from the letter?

- A Martin Luther King Jr. rejects the argument that negotiations are better than direct action.
- B Martin Luther King Jr. uses the example of Socrates to justify the creation of tension and then demands that people create this tension by any means necessary.
- C Martin Luther King Jr. explains why he prefers the use of negotiations over direct action.
- D Martin Luther King Jr. defends the use of nonviolent direct action and urges the readers to seize the chance to make meaningful change.

3. How can the tone of this excerpt from the letter best be characterized?

- A critical yet optimistic
- B angry and regretful
- C defiant and arrogant
- D thoughtful and urgent

4. Read the following sentence: "So the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation."

The word **inevitably** means

- A acting as an obstacle
- B unable to be avoided
- C unable to be changed
- D occurring very soon

5. Which audience did Martin Luther King Jr. most likely target when writing this letter?

- A people who supported his work
- B people who fought for civil rights
- C people who questioned his methods
- D people who lived in the North

6. Explain why Martin Luther King Jr. mentioned the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates in his letter. Use the text of the letter to support your answer.

7. How did Martin Luther King Jr. view the state of the nation when he was writing this letter? Refer to the second paragraph to support your answer.

Teacher Guide & Answers

Passage Reading Level: Lexile 980

Featured Text Structure: Persuasive – the writer analyzes both sides of an argument and offers convincing proof of his/her point of view in order to influence the reader

Passage Summary: In this excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s letter from the Birmingham City Jail, Dr. King justifies the use of nonviolent direct action and the creation of tension as means for opening the door to negotiation and he also declares that the time has come to make real the promise of democracy.

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Suggested answer: Martin Luther King Jr. used the example of Socrates to emphasize the point that constructive nonviolent tension is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to

create a tension in the mind so that people could rise from myths and half-truths in order to reach creative analysis and objective appraisal, Martin Luther King Jr. argues that tension must be created in society so that men will be able to rise from the depths of prejudice and racism to the heights of understanding and brotherhood. Thus, Martin Luther King Jr. notes the beliefs of Socrates regarding tension to support his argument that tension can be productive and help bring about needed change.

7. How did Martin Luther King Jr. view the state of the nation when he was writing this letter? Refer to the second paragraph to support your answer.

Suggested answer: It is clear that Martin Luther King Jr. perceived the nation as being in a gloomy state when he uses the phrase "our pending national elegy," which suggests that the nation is facing a death of sorts, most likely a death of its own principals and promise. In addition, he is also critical of the national policy which he locates as being in "the quicksand of racial injustice," which conveys the sense that this national policy is not stable or solid, as it can easily fall apart due to its racial injustice. However, Martin Luther King Jr. also seemed optimistic, giving hope that the promise of democracy can be made real and that the pending national elegy can be transformed into a creative psalm of brotherhood, as the funeral song can be transformed into a sacred song of brotherhood. Furthermore, he also states that the national policy can be lifted from the "quicksand of racial injustice" to the "solid rock of human dignity." Hence, Martin Luther King Jr. was optimistic that the promise of democracy could be realized if the opportunity was taken to do what is right.