

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 constructive¹ 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 bondage² of myths and half-truths to the unfettered³ realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal⁴, we must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies⁵ 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 pending⁶ national elegy⁷ into a creative psalm⁸ of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

-
1. constructive – serving a useful purpose
 2. bondage – slavery
 3. unfettered – not limited or restrained by anyone or anything
 4. appraisal – a careful assessment and consideration of something
 5. gadfly – an annoying person, especially one who provokes others into action by criticism
 6. pending – waiting to be decided or dealt with
 7. elegy – a sad funeral song or poem for the dead
 8. psalm – a sacred song or hymn