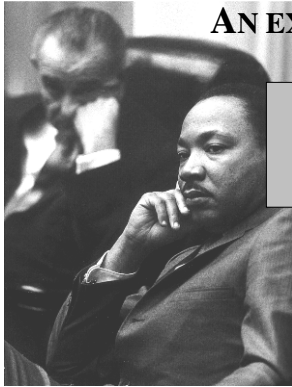


*Winner of an Outstanding Abstract Award*

## **LETTER FROM BIRMINGHAM JAIL: AN EXPERIMENT IN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**



*“For there is the more excellent way of  
love and nonviolent protest.”  
—MARTIN LUTHER KING*

*An award-winning abstract by Sarah Blanchette*

Martin Luther King, Jr. helped set the framework: abolishing segregation, galvanizing the civil rights movement, mobilizing a nation into fruitful action against civic injustice. Yet despite the landmark victories, we still struggle with civil rights issues today. How are we to progress toward a world of acceptance—not only an attitude of tolerance, but a welcoming of all races, however different, without first recognizing what King and his contemporaries confronted?

Our presentation takes the form of a town hall meeting, dividing the audience into three segments and distributing to every participant a summary of each position: King’s advocacy of non-violent protest, the more radical approach of Malcolm X, and the views of the clergy and white moderates. All sides will have an equal voice within the debate. After allowing time for preparation, we conduct an imaginary town hall meeting, with each segment arguing the position it has been assigned.

Though the role-playing may be somewhat restricted by our participants’ limited knowledge of the concrete details of the context within which the issue of segregation vs. integration was so fervently argued, many relevant points and insights will emerge as the discussion ensues. We should see that King’s strategy—using the art of non-violence and compromise as stepping-stones toward the ultimate goal—proved more efficacious in achieving concrete reforms. By framing the debate around the central issues King raised in his famous “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” we provide a strong platform for what can be a politically and racially charged discussion. Because they will consider many facets of the issue, participants will re-live—as opposed to read about—the pressures King faced, gaining a more experiential understanding of the cross-currents involved in his thinking within the context of his time.

How much oppression and hardship had to be endured before the pivotal affirmation that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” rang through a generation fighting for equality so effectively that legislation—with concrete changes—followed? Through this exercise we will see how King and his adherents served not merely as “a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion,” but as “a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.” This debate will generate a heightened awareness of leadership, rhetoric, ethics and history that enhances our understanding of both past and present. This knowledge will aid us in the decisions we make in our own lives: decisions by which we define ourselves and, perhaps, the character of our country.

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