

Martin Luther King Jr.

## A Gift of Love

This Christmas I remember the little black children of Grenada, Mississippi, beaten by grown men as they walked to school. I remember a baby, attacked by rats in a Chicago slum. I remember a young Negro, murdered by a gang in Cicero, Illinois, where he was looking for a job; and a white minister in Georgia, forced out of his sacred office because he spoke for human dignity. I remember, too, farm workers in Mississippi, risking their lives and their livelihood to march out of the cotton fields and vote for freedom and democracy.

This I remember, especially in this season of giving, for these people have followed the example and spirit of Christ himself. They have given mankind a priceless "Gift of Love."

I am thinking now of some teenage boys in Chicago. They have nicknames like "Tex," and "Pueblo," and "Goat," and "Teddy." They hail from the Negro slums. Forsaken by society, they once proudly fought and lived for street gangs like the Vice Lords, the Roman Saints, the Rangers.

But this year, they gave us all the gift of nonviolence, which is indeed a gift of love.

I met these boys and heard their stories in discussions we had on some long, cold nights last winter in the slum apartment I rent in the West Side ghetto of Chicago. I was shocked at the venom they poured out against the world. At times I shared their despair and felt a hopelessness that these young Americans could ever embrace the concept of nonviolence as the effective and powerful instrument of social reform.

All their lives, boys like this have known life as a madhouse of violence and degradation. Some have never experienced a meaningful family life. Some have police records. Some dropped out of the incredibly bad slum schools, then were deprived of honorable work, then took to the streets.

To the young victim of the slums, this society has so limited the alternatives of his life that the expression of his manhood is reduced to the ability to defend himself physically. No wonder it appears logical to him to strike out, resorting to violence against oppression. That is the only way he thinks he can get recognition.

And so, we have seen occasional rioting—and, much more frequently and consistently, brutal acts and crimes by Negroes against Negroes. In many a week in Chicago, as many or more Negro youngsters have been killed in gang fights as were killed in the riots there last summer.

The Freedom Movement has tried to bring a message to boys like Tex. First, we explained that violence can be put down by armed might and police work, that physical force can never solve the underlying social problems. Second, we promised them we could prove, by example, that nonviolence works.

The young slum dweller has good reason to be suspicious of promises. But these young people in Chicago agreed last winter to give nonviolence a test. Then came the very long, very tense, hot summer of 1966, and the first test for many Chicago youngsters: the Freedom March through Mississippi. Gang members went there in carloads.

Those of us who had been in the movement for years were apprehensive about the behavior of the boys. Before the march ended, they were to be attacked by tear gas. They were to be called upon to protect women and children on the march, with no other weapon than their own bodies. To them, it would be a strange and possibly nonsensical way to respond to violence.

But they reacted splendidly! They learned in Mississippi, and returned to teach in Chicago, the beautiful lesson of acting

against evil by renouncing force.

And in Chicago, the test was sterner. These marchers endured not only the filthiest kind of verbal abuse, but also barages of rocks and sticks and eggs and cherry bombs. They did not reply in words or violent deeds. Once again, their only weapon was their own bodies. I saw boys like Goat leap into the air to catch with their bare hands the bricks and bottles that were sailed toward us.

It was through the Chicago marches that our promise to them—that nonviolence achieves results—was redeemed, and their hopes for a better life were rekindled. For they saw, in Chicago, that a humane police force—in contrast to police in Mississippi—could defend the exercise of constitutional rights as well as enforce the law in the ghetto.

They saw, in prosperous white American communities, that hatred and bigotry could and should be confronted, exposed, and dealt with. They saw, in the very heart of a great city, that men of power could be made to listen to the tramp of marching feet and the call for freedom and justice, and use their power to work for a truly Open City for all.

Boys like Teddy, a child of the slums, saw all this because they decided to rise above the cruelties of those slums and to work and march, peacefully, for human dignity. They revitalized my own faith in nonviolence. And these poverty-stricken boys enriched us all with a gift of love.

## Questions for “A Gift of Love”

### For Reflection

Think of someone who has given a gift to humanity. What was the gift? How was it given? In what sense was it a gift to humanity rather than to specific human beings?

### For Group Discussion

What do the people King remembers in the first paragraph have in common?

Why does the “young victim of the slums” King talks about want to “get recognition”? What does King mean when he says, “No wonder it appears logical to him to strike out”?

Why do you think King gives (and uses) specific names like Teddy and Tex in this piece?

What is the “truly Open City for all” that King mentions in the second-to-last paragraph?

In what sense are the actions of Teddy and the other boys “a gift of love”? What is the content of the gift, and to whom is it given?

Does King himself give any gifts over the course of the events described here? How do these gifts come to be recognized or accepted, if at all?

## About the Authors

**Bertolt Brecht** (1898–1956) was born into a prosperous and pious middle-class family in Augsburg, Germany. As a young man, he began medical studies in Munich but abandoned them to become a poet and playwright. His first play, *Baal*, was produced in 1923; *The Threepenny Opera* followed in 1928. A communist and advocate of social reform, Brecht saw his plays and other writings banned in Germany in the 1930s. He went into exile in 1933, living first in Scandinavia and then the United States, where he wrote briefly and without much success for Hollywood. Upon his return to Germany in 1948, Brecht became that country’s most popular contemporary poet, finding an audience on both sides of the political divide. His poem “A Bed for the Night” appeared in his *Collected Poems 1913–1956*.

**Pablo Neruda** (1904–1973) was born Neftalí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto in Parral, Chile. When he was thirteen, he contributed a few articles and his first published poem to *El Mañana*. In 1920, he contributed to the literary journal *Selva Austral* under the name Pablo Neruda, which he adopted in memory of the Czech poet Jan Neruda. From the late 1920s on, Neruda traveled extensively and became active in political causes. He published many books of poetry, as well as memoirs and prose. Neruda received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1971 and died in 1973. “The Lamb and the Pinecone” comes from an interview with Robert Bly, which first appeared in a volume edited by Bly, *Vallejo and Neruda: Selected Poems*.

**Langston Hughes** (1902–1967) was born in Joplin, Missouri, and grew up in Lawrence, Kansas, and Cleveland, Ohio. By the time he entered Columbia University in 1921, Hughes had begun to make a name for himself as a poet. After leaving