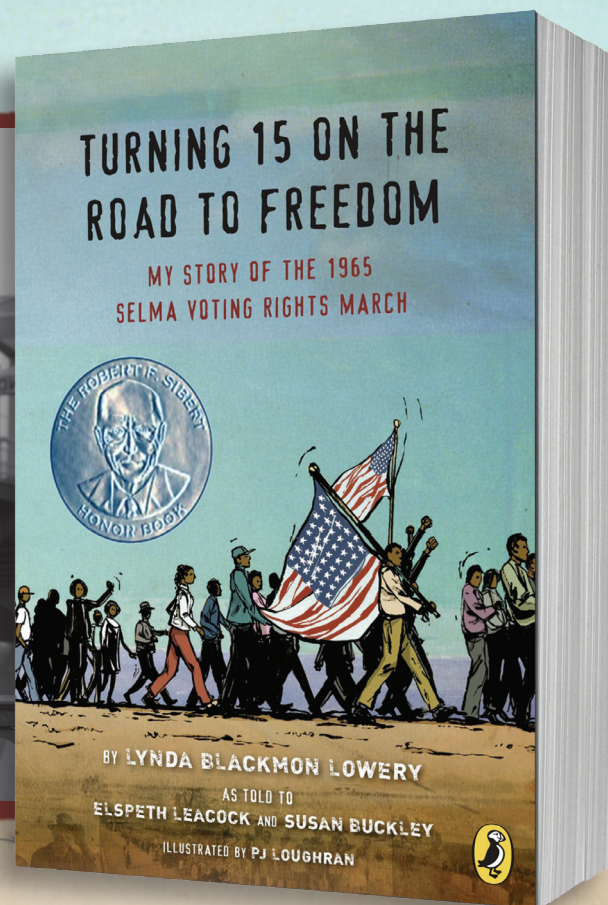


THIS TEACHING GUIDE INTRODUCES TEACHERS AND STUDENTS TO LYNDA BLACKMON LOWERY AND HER STORY AS TOLD IN

TURNING 15 ON THE ROAD TO FREEDOM



Photo Credit © Robin Cooper



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MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND THE 1965 VOTING RIGHTS MOVEMENT

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

Born in 1929, Martin Luther King, Jr., was only 39 years old when he was murdered on April 4, 1968. He had first come to national fame in 1955 when he led the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. At that time the young African American minister was just 26 years old. Over the next 13 years, he would transform the civil rights movement, demonstrate the power of nonviolence, and describe for Americans a dream of racial equality.

Lynda Lowery first heard Dr. King speak in Selma in 1963 when she was 13 years old. His message of the power of nonviolence and the importance of the vote galvanized the young teenager and changed her life.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- At the 1963 March on Washington, Dr. King described his dreams for the future of race in America. Hearing Dr. King speak in Selma inspired Lynda Lowery to become involved in the civil rights movement. What are your dreams for the future of relationships among Americans and what actions might you take to make them come true?
- In 1983 the third Monday of each January was declared a federal holiday honoring Dr. King. Martin Luther King's widow, Coretta Scott King, said "This is not a black holiday. It is a people's holiday." What do you think she meant by this?

ACTIVITIES

- Research the life of Dr. King. Working with classmates, create a "talking timeline" in which you describe key events in his life in chronological order.
- Write a tribute to Dr. King on the 50th anniversary of his death.
- Martin Luther King Day is the only federal holiday that is a tribute to one individual. Why do you think Dr. King was deemed important enough for this honor? Write an editorial supporting the holiday.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND THE VOTING RIGHTS MOVEMENT

On January 3, 1965, Dr. King spoke to a crowd of people in Selma, Alabama. Lynda Lowery was in the audience that day. Dr. King roused the black citizens of Selma to demand the ballot, and to change a century of racial prejudice and restrictions that prevented African Americans in the South from exercising their Constitutional right to vote. Throughout the Selma Voting Rights Movement, King made it clear that voting was essential to creating a just and equal society.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Selma activist Amelia Boynton had a sign in her office saying “A voteless people is a hopeless people.” What do you think the sign means? Why would Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference believe that voting was so important?
- Why was King’s involvement such a key part of the success of the Voting Rights Movement in Selma?
- Dr. King said: “So long as I do not... possess the right to vote I do not possess myself. I cannot make up my mind—it is made up for me. I cannot live as a democratic citizen, observing the laws I have helped to enact—I can only submit to the edict of others.” Think about how you would feel if you were denied the right to vote when you turned 18.

ACTIVITIES

- Research voting patterns today. Imagine that Dr. King could talk to a group of 18-year-olds who are just eligible to vote. Write a speech he might make to explain why voting matters.
- Read aloud, then summarize, Dr. King’s speech on March 25, 1965, in Montgomery (<http://www.mlkonline.net/ourgod.html>).
- Work with a small group to create a storyboard of the history of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Beginning with Bloody Sunday, show the events including President Johnson’s speech to Congress, the Voting Rights Act, and changes in voter registration in the South. End with current controversies regarding the Voting Rights Act and voter suppression.

“STEADY, LOVING CONFRONTATION”

In 1963, 13-year-old Lynda Lowery heard Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., urge the people of Selma to fight discrimination non-violently, with “steady, loving confrontation.” These words changed Lynda’s life. Lynda says that “steady” told her not to give up, to keep up the protest. “Loving” told her to listen with her heart, not just her ears. And “confrontation” told her to face injustice openly and strongly, without backing down.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Many people say Dr. King ended the terror of living as a black person, especially in the South. How might the idea of “steady, loving confrontation” help someone like Lynda overcome fear?
- With a partner or small group, discuss how you feel about protests. Imagine protesting an issue that matters to you. What would be challenging about nonviolence? What would be constructive?
- A 2011 study on civil resistance found that nonviolent resistance was more than two times as effective as violent resistance in bringing about change. Why do you think that would be the case?

ACTIVITIES

- Research the life and philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi or Bayard Rustin. Explain how they influenced Dr. King and the nonviolent movement.
- Plan a nonviolent protest on an issue you care about. Explain how you would take action and why.

CHILDREN IN THE MOVEMENT

Beginning with civil rights protests in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, children—sometimes as young as 8 or 9 years old—played a crucial role in the movement. Although civil rights leaders were criticized by some for putting children in harm’s way, Dr. King believed involving children was “one of the wisest moves we made.” He believed their participation gave young people an understanding of “their stake in freedom and justice.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- As a young person, how would you have felt about participating in civil rights protests such as those in Birmingham and Selma?
- Do you agree or disagree with civil rights leaders who decided to involve children in protests? Explain.
- Why do you think Dr. King believed that having children in the movement helped to convince people that the civil rights case was just?

ACTIVITIES

- Choose a civil rights protest such as the Selma Voting Rights Movement. Imagine that you were jailed for taking part in the protests. Write a letter to your parents, telling them how you feel.
- Research the experiences of young people in both Birmingham and Selma. Write newspaper articles comparing the two.

WHY VOTING RIGHTS?

Why were Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others focused on voting rights in 1965? Why not segregation and the white supremacist violence that supported it? Let’s look at the center of the voting rights movement in Selma, Alabama to find out.

There were 14,400 white and 15,115 black citizens eligible to vote in and around Selma. So there were more black citizens than white. But the black citizens were fired from their jobs or evicted from their homes if they tried to register to vote. Those who still tried had to pass a test with questions like “how many jelly beans are in this jar?” So of the 9,530 people registered to vote, 9,195 were white. And whom did they vote for? Segregationists all, but the worst one was Selma’s vicious white supremacist sheriff, Jim Clark. In 1965 it seemed the only way to change was to vote the brutal segregationists out of office.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Lynda Lowery was 14 years old when she joined the voting rights movement in Selma. When asked why she marched and went to jail she said, “I just felt that once my parents got the right to vote, it would be a whole lot better. There was power in a vote.” What did she mean by that?
- What ethnic and religious groups live in your community? Do you think your community’s elected officials represent everyone fairly? Why or why not?

ACTIVITIES

- Design a campaign to encourage voting.
- Take a poll of 7 to 10 adults. To get a range of views look for diversity in the adults you speak to. Ask: What do you think the most important issue in our community is today and do you think our elected representatives are addressing it? Choose one of their issues or one of your own and write a flyer that brings attention to the issue for the next election.

KEEPING DEMOCRACY STRONG

A healthy democracy depends on informed citizens who vote. How healthy is our democracy? According to one source the United States ranks 138th out of 172 countries in voter turnout. Why do so many Americans not vote? Many are not registered, so they can't. For those registered who still didn't vote in the last presidential election, here are some of the main reasons they gave: The top one was they were too busy, followed by illness or disability, lack of interest, or dislike for the candidates or issues. Here are some practices used in countries with better voter turnout:

- Same-day voter registration as in Canada (13 states including Iowa and Colorado have already adopted this)
- Automatic voter registration when you turn 18 as in France (and Oregon)
- Most countries have a much shorter campaign. Japan's is just 12 days!
- Mandatory voting as in Australia (people pay a fine if they don't vote)
- Elections held on the weekend as in Greece or Australia
- Online voting as in Estonia
- Lower voting age (16) as in Brazil, Nicaragua, and Austria

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What do you think would be the impact of 16-year-olds voting? Would you be supportive of that? Would it boost interest in the issues and candidates?
- Which solutions used in other countries do you think could be successful in the United States? Give your reasons.

ACTIVITIES

- How healthy is democracy in your state and community? Research the voter turnout using your state's website or the U.S. Census Bureau to find out, and give your state a report card grade. Write an editorial about this.



RACE, RACISM, AND SEGREGATION

SEGREGATION

In 1896 the Supreme Court ruled that facilities could be segregated, or separated, by race as long as they were equal. Laws did not overturn this “separate but equal” policy until 1954. Textbooks show us segregated water fountains. But the issue was much bigger than that. The military and major sports teams were segregated across the country, for example. And in many places schools, housing, hospitals, swimming pools, beaches, parks, libraries, restaurants, hotels, public bathrooms, churches, and more were segregated. There was even segregation after death—in cemeteries.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What happens when two groups of kids in one community can’t play together or get to know each other at all?
- In segregated communities, separate was never equal because every elected official was white. They chose to provide more funding to the white schools and libraries. Why do you think it was important for those officials to keep black people from voting?
- Look online at this photograph of a “colored” entrance to a movie theater.

<http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/ppmsca.12888>

Discuss what it would be like to have to use this entrance. Do you like to choose where you sit at the movies? What if you were with someone elderly, disabled, or afraid of heights? What problems would this “separate but equal” entrance cause and how would it make you feel?

ACTIVITIES

- Have you ever been made to feel “less than” others or not liked by a group? Do you think the people who didn’t accept you were prejudiced in some way? Write a poem or rap song about the experience.
- Research and report on a hero such as Elizabeth Eckford, Ruby Bridges, or James Meredith, who helped end segregation in a school, or Jackie Robinson, who integrated baseball.

LET'S TALK ABOUT RACE AND RACISM

When Lynda Blackmon Lowery was a child in Selma, Alabama, her mother died. She has said, "Segregation killed my mother. I believe that." Lynda's mother died because there was no "black blood" at the hospital and she could not be given "white blood." Even blood was segregated. Is there a difference between "black blood and white blood"? No. The idea that there is a difference is called racism, and racism not only killed Lynda's mother, it continues to kill. So let's talk about it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Racism is the idea that one race is superior to others. Is that possible? Think about these three points: 1) What are racial differences? There are differences we can see with our eyes. People from Europe, Asia, and Sub-Saharan Africa look different. And we call each different look a race. But how people look changes gradually over huge distances. There is no place on Earth where one look begins, and another ends. 2) More differences can be found *within* a race than between races. 3) None of the differences between races has anything to do with intelligence or personality.

ACTIVITIES

- Fear of strangers may be as old as the human species. But ideas of race and racism are only hundreds of years old. Research and report on the history of racism.
- Take a stand against racism. Have you heard a racist statement or seen a racist action? Think about what could be said or done, non-violently, to counter that action, and write a short play or story about it.

THEN AND NOW

In recent years protests against racism and discrimination have intensified again. Movements such as Black Lives Matter have grown, to fight against issues that are both the same as and different from those of the 1950s and 1960s.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How would you explain the meaning of the name "Black Lives Matter" to someone from another country?
- Going online, study this photograph of protestors in Selma in 1965.
http://www.crmvet.org/crmpics/kouns/kouns_65_selma4.jpg
What does it tell you about differences and similarities in nonviolent protests then and now?

ACTIVITIES

- Research and report on the Black Lives Matter movement.
- With a partner or small group, write a dramatic scene in which a parent who participated in the Selma March discusses issues with a young person involved in Black Lives Matter.

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., AND THE 1965 VOTING RIGHTS MOVEMENT RESOURCES

- *A Time to Break Silence: The Essential Works of Martin Luther King, Jr., for Students* by Martin Luther King, Jr. (with an introduction by Walter Dean Myers)
- *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World* by Martin Luther King, Jr.
- *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* edited by Clayborne Carson
- http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_address_at_the_conclusion_of_selma_march.1.html
- <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/03/05/black-history-bloody-sunday-timeline/24463923/>
- Vote411.org
- www.electproject.org/2016
- *The Fight to Vote* by Michael Waldman

RACE, RACISM, AND SEGREGATION RESOURCES

- *We Are One: The Story of Bayard Rustin* by Larry Dane Brimner
- *Gandhi for Kids: His Life and Ideas* by Ellen Mahoney
- *Selma: The Bridge to the Ballot and Mighty Times: The Children's March*, Southern Poverty Law Center/Teaching Tolerance
- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- San Francisco Public Schools, <http://sfusd.libguides.com/blacklivesmatter>
- *We've Got a Job* by Cynthia Levinson
- *Race, Racism, Prejudice and Discrimination—What are they?*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jt0f5WyAoGU> (6 minutes)
- *A Look at Race Relations through a Child's Eyes*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GPVNJgfDwpw> (10 minutes)
- *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* by Mildred Patillo Beales

TURNING 15 ON THE ROAD TO FREEDOM: MY STORY OF THE 1965 SELMA VOTING RIGHTS MARCH

BY Lynda Blackmon Lowery

AS TOLD TO Elspeth Leacock and Susan Buckley

ILLUSTRATED BY PJ Loughran

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For more information on the
Turning 15 on the Road to Freedom play
WWW.TURNING15ONThEROAD.COM

