

“Suffering and Faith”

27 April 1960
Chicago, Ill.

Upon reading the draft of King's essay "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence," Christian Century editor Harold Fey urged him to include material drawn from personal experiences: "You have been maligned, arrested and detained. You were stabbed. You say nothing about such sufferings, which must surely have had some influence on your thought."¹ King added these four paragraphs, but they arrived too late for inclusion in the article published on 13 April.²

Some of my personal sufferings over the last few years have also served to shape my thinking. I always hesitate to mention these experiences for fear of conveying the wrong impression. A person who constantly calls attention to his trials and sufferings is in danger of developing a martyr complex and of making others feel that he is consciously seeking sympathy. It is possible for one to be self-centered in his self-denial and self-righteous in his self-sacrifice. So I am always reluctant to refer to my personal sacrifices. But I feel somewhat justified in mentioning them in this article because of the influence they have had in shaping my thinking.

Due to my involvement in the struggle for the freedom of my people, I have

1. Fey to King, 31 December 1959.

2. An editor's note preceded the essay: "In his article for the series titled 'How My Mind Has Changed,' Martin Luther King, Jr., said nothing about his reaction to his personal perils (see the *Century* for 13 April). Before publishing the article, we asked him to consider whether or not his experience with danger and suffering had affected his thinking, and if it had, to add comments along this line. His comments arrived after his article had gone to press, so we publish them herewith" (see also Ballou to Fey, 7 April 1960).

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known very few quiet days in the last few years. I have been arrested five times and put in Alabama jails. My home has been bombed twice. A day seldom passes that my family and I are not the recipients of threats of death. I have been the victim of a near fatal stabbing. So in a real sense I have been battered by the storms of persecution. I must admit that at times I have felt that I could no longer bear such a heavy burden, and have been tempted to retreat to a more quiet and serene life. But every time such a temptation appeared, something came to strengthen and sustain my determination. I have learned now that the Master's burden is light precisely when we take his yoke upon us.³

My personal trials have also taught me the value of unmerited suffering. As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways that I could respond to my situation: either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course. Recognizing the necessity for suffering I have tried to make of it a virtue. If only to save myself from bitterness, I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transform myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have lived these last few years with the conviction that unearned suffering is redemptive.

There are some who still find the cross a stumbling block, and others consider it foolishness, but I am more convinced than ever before that it is the power of God unto social and individual salvation. So like the Apostle Paul I can now humbly yet proudly say, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus."⁴ The suffering and agonizing moments through which I have passed over the last few years have also drawn me closer to God. More than ever before I am convinced of the reality of a personal God.

PD. *Christian Century* 77 (27 April 1960): 510.

3. Cf. Matthew 11:30: "For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

4. Galatians 6:17.