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Tribute to Martin Luther King

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My first real impression of Martin Luther King came from reading his book STRIDE TOWARD FREEDOM. This was his account of the historic 1955 Montgomery bus boycott when thousands of foot-weary Negroes walked in human dignity rather than continue riding at the back of public buses in dehumanizing humiliation. I recall vividly and feelingly now the mood it produced in me: I was so overcome by its chronicle of cruelty and courage; its tale of harassment and heroism; its picture of brutality and beauty, that I sat in my study and wept. I regard that book now as a classic in the literature of American social history.

It was suggested that on this past Friday, the day after his murder in Memphis, that one could hear in the table talk, the barroom gossip, the streetcorner chatter of our town the opinion that though murder is always to be disapproved and discouraged, Martin Luther King did get, after all, what he had asked for. From the quarters of this opinion no sympathy was offered, no tears were shed, and no regrets expressed. Just by a kind of cold, almost computerized logic, it was judged that he got what he asked for. Certainly anyone, so this reasoning runs, who stirs up the masses and leads marches is playing with fire and had better not complain about the possibility of getting killed. Martin Luther King did not so complain.

Since this is the beginning of Holy Week 1968, I am moved to suggest that this is probably just what the detached, cool logicians of some 1900 years ago said as they watched a young man writhing in agony on a Cross set on a hill outside a city wall. Didn't he get just what he asked for? Didn't he tell his disciples on the road that he expected to die in Jerusalem? Wasn't he playing with fire when he championed the cause of the poor, consorted with sinners, and upset the ~~men~~ table of the money changers in the temple?

Yes he did play with fire; yes, he did get what he asked for. And in this sense so did Martin Luther King. But somehow we are left to ponder the fact that to take Jesus ~~seriously~~ of Nazareth seriously, and to follow him unflinchingly, is to ask for the same thing. And so it has been and will be

for the followers of Martin Luther King. Just to dare to live magnificently and lovingly may be to ask for death. If you entered a burning building to save a child, and got killed for your efforts, couldn't it be said that you asked for it?

So Martin Luther King did get what he asked for: he asked for justice, and a revolution, only partially realized to be sure, has begun. He asked for civil rights and a Civil Rights bill has been passed by Congress. He asked for the Negro ~~man~~ as a ^{to be respected,} man, and Time Magazine named him its Man of the Year. He asked for true integration and he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace. He asked for peace in Vietnam and only a few days before he died the first faint signs of peace began to appear over ~~the~~ that tired and tortured land. He asked that the Negro people be given a place in the sun, and in ~~his~~ respect for his memory the President of the United States ordered that the flags of the nation be flown at half mast.

Indeed, Martin Luther King got what he asked for. But in another sense so are we who despised ~~him~~ his ethic of non-violent love, and we who scorned his leadership, getting what we have asked for. ~~We~~ Because of our pride and prejudice, our indifference and our intransigence, we too are getting what we have asked for: violence in our city streets; the flames of burning buildings leaping up and licking the blackness of the night sky, the flames lit by the friction of hate which our hearts have generated; the terrors of hostile forces striking back against us in revenge and retaliation. Yes, Martin Luther King played with fire, but so have we. Now we must face the fire next time!

But for what shall we now ask? Our greatest tribute to this man would be that we would begin to ask for justice and equal rights and dignity for all men and children in God's creation. We shall honor him if we can learn to practice his doctrine of non-violent love. We can have, eventually, peace in our cities and in our world if we invoke in our memory of him the magnanimous spirit of the great Abraham Lincoln who, in looking over ~~the wreckage of the~~

the unspeakable wreckage of a civil war, was able to say:

"With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan - to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations."

I think that ~~is~~ not too much for which to ask.