

Fear In Our Time

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Summary: Recounts times she experienced strong fear—being shot at and verbally abused in the South, in prison. Urges praying for the courage to bear pain and hardship because of one’s belief in pacifism and faith in God. (DDLW #253).

People probably do not realize with what fear and trembling I speak or write about the Catholic Worker, our ideas and our point of view. It is an extreme point of view, and yet it is tested and proved over and over again; it is almost as if God says to us “Do you really mean what you say?” and then gives us a chance to prove it. We have to live with the positions we take, and at the same time we are bound to be beset with all kinds of human doubts: who are we, who have so seldom been tried and have not suffered as others have in war, to take such a position? I remember having a nightmare during World War II in which, thinking of our pacifist position, I heard a voice saying “Be kind, Cain,” as if such words could ward off the blow that was about to fall. I know what human fear is and how often it keeps us from following our conscience. We find so many ways of rationalizing our positions. There are all kinds of fear: fear of losing our bodily goods, fear of poverty, fear of losing our job, our reputation, and not least of all there is the strange business of bodily fear. Gandhi’s son once described the humiliation he felt at seeing his father beaten up in a railway station in South Africa. Nothing is worse than that sense of utter humiliation we feel when pain is inflicted on us. We are reduced to an animal status; we are lesser men for having taken a blow or endured pain.

One of the situations when I was most afraid was in my visit some years ago to Koinonia, an interracial community in Americus, Georgia. A very wonderful Baptist minister named Clarence Jordan and a few of his companions from a theological seminary in the South had decided to tackle the problems of poverty, interracial conflict and agriculture by taking over two thousand acres of land and starting a community based on diversified farming. They had cattle and cultivated fruit, nuts, cotton, and all kinds of vegetables. This truly interracial community thrived and prospered until they came to public attention when they endorsed some young Negro men who were trying to get into a white college. This precipitated a real reign of terror.

The elaborate roadside stand with a refrigeration system that the community used to market its smoked ham, bacon and other meats, was dynamited and

completely destroyed in the middle of the night. Community members were shot at, some of the houses were burnt down, marauders cut the wire that fenced in the cattle and threw torches into the hay barn, setting fire to the hay. They were boycotted, couldn't buy oil for their tractors or cars, couldn't buy seed or fertilizer, couldn't get insurance on their cars or houses.

When Clarence Jordan came up to New York City and spoke in Community Church, many people volunteered to go down there and help out. Four of us from the Catholic Worker went down and stayed for two weeks each, during the spring, when they were planting. One day I went out with some of the community members in a truck to try to buy seeds. When we entered a store we were called "nigger-lovers," and I was called a "northern Communist whore." And similar expressions of hate and contempt and venom were flung at us in every store we went into. We drove from town to town trying to buy seed, and were of course unsuccessful. But we did learn something of what mob hatred is like. And I must say that it makes your blood run cold. Not many of us ever experienced this kind of venomous hatred. Even though we know what has happened, what unbelievable atrocities have been committed in the South over the years: Negroes dragged behind cars and killed and cut into pieces for souvenirs, unbelievable hatred and murder and torture going on over the years. It has been lessening, of course, year by year. When a year passes without a single lynching, everybody congratulates themselves.

The men were so busy with the spring planting that the women volunteered to watch at night. We signed up for two or three hours of watching at a public road that ran between two pieces of Koinonia property. We were supposed to sit in the station wagon and if we saw a car coming down the road, get out with lanterns and walk up and down to let them know people were there. If any injury was offered, we were to try and get the license number of the car.

About two o'clock in the morning, while I was engaged in conversation about voluntary communities with the woman who was sharing the watch with me, a car with no lights on came down the road and suddenly the car we were in was peppered with shots. The car was there and gone before we could realize what had happened. It is strange how the fear always comes afterward, your bones turn to water and your whole body seems to melt away with fear.

Cotton Country

Another occasion on which experienced fear was on a visit to a Catholic Worker house of hospitality in Memphis, which had been started by a young Negro woman named Helen Caldwell Riley. She had started the house because several children had been burnt to death after being locked in a garage by their parents who had gone out to the cotton fields to earn enough to pay the rent for that old garage which was their home. So Helen rented a big store on Beale Street,

where young women would come in before daylight and deposit their babies and a can of evaporated milk and would not return until after dark.

Helen later married and one day she and her husband drove me down into Mississippi. We visited a town called Mound Bayou, in the Delta region, which is completely inhabited by Negroes. The biggest property in the area is a twenty-five thousand acre plantation owned by a British company. I stayed overnight in Mound Bayou and next day a Negro priest drove me around the Delta section. This priest, a Society of the Divine Word father, had gone to a large seminary for Negroes in the south and had chosen to remain in the South after his ordination. There was a bullet hole in the windshield of his car; he too had been shot at.

Among the towns we visited was a little town galled Money, where Emmet Till, a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago, had been kidnaped in the middle of the night by some white men because he was supposed to have whistled at a white woman. After flogging him, they weighted him down and threw him in the river. The white men were tried in a local court and acquitted. (But I must add that we were told by local people that these white men later became nomads, because they were cold-shouldered and boycotted in every town they moved to).

All that day we were followed by a carload of white men. The feeling is indescribable. You can well understand why Southern whites are afraid to show any sympathy for the Negro, knowing that they may be bombed or dynamited. No matter how many white people down there are trying to do something, to provide funds for people who were arrested and their families, no matter how many are helping, the sense of fear persists.

The reason I called my last book **Loaves and Fishes** is that it takes just a few loaves and fishes to be multiplied to feed five thousand. The whole movement represented by Martin Luther King began that way. Many Southern Negroes had been coming to the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee to attend weekend workshops and study ways by which they could better the conditions of the Negroes, teach them to read and write so that they could pay their poll tax and vote. One of the women who attended one of these workshops for the first time was so inspired by this group activity and the sense that there was a movement of this kind, that she returned to Montgomery, Alabama, ready for action.

She was a woman who earned her living by sewing. One night when she was going home in a crowded bus she was ordered to give up her seat to a white person or else move to the rear, and she, thinking of her people and not just herself (although undoubtedly she was tired) refused to move and was arrested. That was the incident that sparked the whole Montgomery bus strike. When the Negroes began to boycott the buses, every weapon was used against them. They were repeatedly arrested for traffic violations****and all kinds of terrorism was practiced against them. But it went on and a whole movement was built in the South, centering around Martin Luther King and other ministers.

The Nun's Story

A few years ago I went down to Danville, Virginia, at the invitation of a white nun. There again I had an opportunity to experience this sense of fear, to realize how strong and persistent it is. The nun, Mother Teresa, had taken part in a protest on the steps of City Hall, along with a group of Negroes. Three ministers who had helped organize the demonstration had been herded into an alley, where fire hoses had been turned on them. They were then beaten unmercifully and thrown into prison.

After Mother Teresa spoke on the local radio station about the protest, the priest of her district told her that she would be put under interdict if she continued these activities and that he was going to ask the bishop to see to it that her work was stopped. She was an elderly woman and her work, which she had been building up for the past twenty years, was very dear to her. It is a small Order, the Order of Christ the King, and serves both Negroes and whites. So she telephoned me and asked if I would come down and take her place at a Negro meeting where she had promised to speak. The meeting was held in a large church which was filled with people. They sang hymns, prayed together and listened to speakers who had just been released from prison. I spoke about nonviolence. It is very hard to speak on such occasions and I haven't the slightest idea now what I said.

When you're with a group, when there's a whole night of singing, in the churches, on the streets, in the prisons, the very act of singing produces a tremendous courage and all fear evaporates. You can walk on the picket line and though you are conscious of the terrible hostility around you and there is a wrecked building across the way and a whole vacant lot is filled with bricks, handy for a battle, you have this sense of courage. Why? Because you have prayed for it; and because you are with others. The women on the picket line with me had never been on a picket line or taken part in any kind of demonstration, although one of them was carrying a sign which said. "I forgive the chief of police the beating he gave me." She had been kicked and trampled on and had her face smashed. The same brutality that was inflicted upon the men had been inflicted on the women and children. It is something that can scarcely be understood or described. I think that we should acknowledge this fear and recognize that it is something valid, but also something that we have to fight against.

It seems to me that we must begin to equal a little bit the courage of the Communists. One of the ways my Communist friend taunt me is by saying, in effect "People who are religious believe in everlasting life, and yet look how cowardly they are. And we who believe only in this life, see how hard we work and how much we sacrifice. We are not trying to enjoy all this and heaven too. We are willing to give up our life in order to save it."

There is really no answer to this kind of taunt. When I was in Cuba in September 1962, I witnessed what a Franciscan priest, Herve Chaigne, has called an "exemplary" revolution. I felt that it was an example to us in zeal, in idealism

and in self-sacrifice and that unless we began to approach in our profession of Christianity some of this zeal of the Communists, we weren't going to get anywhere. But we have to go ahead and think in terms of a third way, not just those two alternatives, capitalism or communism, or my country or the fellowship of all men. We have to begin to see what Christianity really is, that "our God is a living fire; though He slay me yet will I trust him." We have to think in terms of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount and have this readiness to suffer. "We have not yet resisted unto blood." We have not yet loved our neighbor with the kind of love that is a precept to the extent of laying down our life for him. And our life very often means our money, money that we have sweated for; it means our bread, our daily living, our rent, our clothes. We haven't shown ourselves ready to lay down our life. This is a new precept, it is a new way, it is the new man we are supposed to become. I always comfort myself by saying that Christianity is only two days old (a thousand years are as one day in the sight of God) and so it is only a couple of days that are past and now it is about time we began to take these things literally, to begin tomorrow morning and say, "now I have begun."

We do have examples of this willingness to suffer. After World War II, a young man in Chicago named John Doebele, who had been in charge of a CW house in Baltimore before the war and had trained to be an anaesthetist at the Alexian Brothers Hospital, read a news item about a Negro woman whose house on the edge of a white neighborhood had been burnt down by neighboring whites. John took a few hundred dollars, which was all the money he had, collected more in the county hospital where he was working as an anesthetist and took it to the woman so that she could make a down payment on another house. On the way home he was set upon by a group of Negro youths who beat him up and kicked his ribs in so that he ended up a patient in the hospital. When his friend visited him, he said, "We scarcely****have begun to be accounted worthy to suffer."

What is there to expect except suffering in work of this kind? St. Paul said; "Rejoice in tribulation." I suppose that one of the reasons conscientious objectors and pacifists go to jail is to show that they can take it. It is a hard thing to be a pacifist when men are showing such great courage and have endured so much in the armies. We can't talk about these things in colleges without having some of the kids ask "Do you think my father is guilty of mortal sin because he was in the army?" Well, a man must follow his conscience, being in the army often demands great courage, and who is to judge?

Everyone used to laugh at Ammon Hennacy who boasted about how many times he had been in prison and would always ask people, "Have you been in jail?" If you hadn't been in jail you were scarcely of the fraternity. Well, you go to jail, and you think that here maybe you will have a chance to be really poor. We talk about poverty and being poor in spirit. But meanwhile we have to admit that we have comfortable backgrounds, we have had an education, we have all kinds of enjoyments, like reading and listening to music. We have our luxuries even while we talk about voluntary poverty. And we realize that all the time.

When you go to jail you finally feel that you are being stripped of whatever you have. You look on as the police empty your handbag. You start right out being humiliated by having so much in your handbag. I remember when we first demonstrated against taking shelter in an air-raid drill, in 1955. There were twenty-eight of us and we had to be photographed, fingerprinted, stripped, showered and examined. It went on until 4:00 in the morning. We were put in tiny cells that were anything but clean; the mattresses were stained and dirty. You look at the equipment of a city prison in the great city of New York in the richest country of the world and you think how unbelievable it is that they cannot afford anything better than this for their prisoners.

There's a little element of fear there too because one of the things that has been done when people are in prison for conscience is to instigate, to build up resentment, especially in wartime, among the other prisoners, by saying that pacifists are spies, Communists, etc.; people have been maltreated and abused in prison because of this. There is also the hostility between Negroes and whites that is quite apt to break out, so that there is an element of fear in your imagination that conjures up these things.

But in general, there is a feeling of relief when you are in prison. Here you are now, stripped of everything, no responsibility of any kind, no telephones, no mail; you are there, and Holy Mother the State is taking care of you. The food in the city prison was good, just as good as Catholic Worker food, and there was a great abundance of it. As a matter of fact, we saw so much being thrown out after every meal, as it is in the army, and thought, what a horrible waste.

The cells were small, we were confined and got little air; there were tiny little windows and we almost stifled in summer time. So we had our discomforts. But there was a commissary and I was able to buy some instant coffee and take my missal and lie down on my cot free of all responsibility. So there was luxury even there.

I have often thought of the youths in the fiery furnace who sang the Psalms and the fire was just like a gentle wind and they were conscious of another person with them. In Shackleton's account of his explorations in the Arctic he tells how he and two companions were going over a horrible glacier, a journey that involved much danger and suffering. And all of them said afterwards that they had been conscious of another person along with them. The youths of Uganda, Protestant and Catholic, who were buried alive in the 1880's also went to their doom singing hymns. Since then we have the example of Buddhist monks and American war protesters submitting themselves to the flames. It is hard to believe and we cringe in fear at the very thought. And we don't believe that we'll ever have the strength to take the way of nonviolence which may result in physical martyrdom. We don't believe in God's mercy, and we can only say: "Help thou mine unbelief" . . . Take away my heart of stone and give me a heart of flesh . . . In thee have I hoped, let me never be confounded." These are the acts of faith, hope and charity.

Before World War II one of our friends used to drive a truck around to factories in Baltimore, selling coffee, sandwiches and doughnuts, and began to drop off the leftovers at our House of Hospitality in that city. Pretty soon he came to feel that this was not doing enough for the poor, so he joined the group and donated his truck. He stayed with us for a long time. He was the kind of person who went to great extremes. He slept on a bundle of clothes in the clothing room and was abused by the poor who came. When he didn't have anything for them, they would accuse him of being a drunken bum who had sold the clothes for a bottle. He put up with this kind of contempt and abuse and lived a life of complete sacrifice. Later he joined the Trappists and was put to work baking bread. One day the spiritual reading at table described a soldier who used to utter ejaculatory prayers while machine-gunning the enemy. Poor Smitty suddenly began to weep and cry in the most uncontrollable fashion. He rushed up to Father Abbot and fell on his knees by him, weeping and sobbing and asking how the Mystical Body of Christ could thus rend itself.

I have seen two mental hospitals where people rend themselves; it is a horrible sight. Our conscientious objectors worked in one, a place without hope where one man had to be permanently tied down to his bed because he tore at his own flesh. He had already put out his own eyes. The Mystical Body of Christ [is] rending itself in this way. It seems to me that these are the kind of things we must meditate on.

It is not worthwhile writing or speaking unless you say what is in your heart and say it as you see things. This is the way. This is what converts expect when they come into the Church and they find it in the lives of the saints who accept the idea of death in whatever form it takes. We say all these things in our prayers and don't mean them. And God takes us at our word, fortunately, and so we are saved in spite of ourselves; we are just dragged in by the hair of the head. But this is the message that we try to give at the Catholic Worker. It is painful to speak of and that is one of the reasons we rejoice in tribulation, we rejoice in suffering and so we can speak in those terms.

We have been called necrophiliacs, we have been accused of taking a morbid delight in the gutter and worshiping ashcans. The fact of the matter is that God transforms it all, so that out of this junkheap comes beauty. We have poetry and painting and sculpture and music and all of these things for the delight of the senses that are given to us right in the midst****of filth and degradation and mires so that I often feel we know whereof we speak. God certainly comes to the rescue over and over again and enables us to do what seems utterly impossible. Many a person comes into the Church under utterly impossible circumstances; it is as though they were taking their own life, as though they were dying, in order to do this. I have seen people unhinged by it. We have quite a few with us who are disturbed, who have suffered extremely, have cut themselves off from their families and backgrounds. It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God. It is not anything that we can take except with the utmost seriousness and yet it is of course the greatest joy in the world.