King’s Ties to Atlanta Shaped His Career

Even after he became a civil rights leader and a Nobel Prize winning advocate of non-violent struggle, in the "quiet recesses" of his heart Martin Luther King, Jr. remained a Baptist preacher.

"This is my being and my heritage," he once explained, "for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher and the great-grandson of a Baptist preacher."

During his teenage years, Dr. King rejected some of his father’s religious beliefs. He briefly turned away from his inherited calling as a preacher. He even left the South to attend Crozer Theological Seminary, in Pennsylvania, and Boston University.

But Dr. King remained attached to his Atlanta roots. During a period of extensive black migration out of the South, he would return to live and work in the city of his birth. While leading efforts to bring about profound changes in American race relations, he retained his ties to the city where he was born and the church in which he was baptized.

The first 12 years of his childhood were spent in the home at 501 Auburn Ave. that his parents shared with his maternal grandparents. The grandparents, A.D. Williams and Jennie Celeste Williams, had transformed nearby Ebeneezer Baptist Church from a struggling congregation without a building in the 1890’s into one of black Atlanta’s most prominent institutions. Martin Luther King, Sr. would succeed his father-in-law as Ebeneezer’s pastor, and Alberta Williams King would follow her mother as a powerful presence in Ebeneezer’s affairs.

Both A.D. Williams and the senior King were pioneering proponents of social gospel Christianity, combining pastoring with civil rights activism. Both were NAACP leaders and played major roles in state and national Baptist organizations.

The tightly knit extended family in which the younger King grew up would forever shape his worldview.

"It is quite easy for me to think of a God of love mainly because I grew up in a family where love was central and where lovely relationships were ever present," Dr. King remembered early in his adulthood. "It is quite easy for me to think of the universe as basically friendly mainly because of my uplifting hereditary and environmental circumstances. It is quite easy for me to lean more toward optimism than pessimism about human nature 'mainly because of my childhood experiences."

'-Gradual intaking of noble ideals'

Ebenezer was Dr. King's second home. Sunday school was the place where he established his boyhood friendships and, honed his leadership skills. He would later insist that his religious beliefs did not derive from an abrupt "crisis" moment but from the largely unconscious "gradual intaking of the noble ideals set forth in my, family and my environment." Religion "was closely knitted to life. In fact the two cannot be separated; religion for me is life."

Dr. King also saw his neighborhood as 14-positive influence on his life. "The community in which I was born was quite ordinary in terms of social status," he explained. "Yet I insist that this was a wholesome community, notwithstanding the fact that none of us were ever considered members of the 'upper upper class.' Crime was at a minimum in our community, and most of our neighbors were deeply religious."

Dr. King's strong sense of belonging ironically gave him the confidence to become a rebel. He could challenge Baptist orthodoxy while remaining part of the church. Even as a young boy, he did not accept his religious education uncritically. "At the age of 13," he recalled, "I shocked my Sunday school class by denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus."
His increasingly liberal political and theological outlook led to arguments with Daddy King. While remaining skeptical of his father's doctrinal conservatism, however, the younger King looked to his father as a role model. At Crozer Theological Seminary, he explained that his father "set forth a noble example that I didn't [mind] following."

Dr. King was 19 when he left Atlanta for his first extended stay away from his parents' home. Yet even as he completed his studies at Crozer and at Boston University, he continued to rediscover the values of his childhood.

During his adulthood, he traveled throughout the world, but in a basic sense he also moved ever closer to the world of his childhood. After completing his coursework at Boston, rather than accepting offers elsewhere he returned home to the South, taking the pastorate of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery. After gaining national attention as the leader of the bus boycott movement, he came home to Atlanta in 1960.

**Spiritual homecoming as well**

Spiritually he also came home: to Ebenezer Baptist Church, where he became Daddy King's co-pastor; and to his father's uplifting, personal God and a measure of religious emotionalism as an antidote to the abstract notions of divinity he had learned about in graduate school.

While his fame and influence continued to expand during the 1960s, he centered his life in the Auburn Avenue neighborhood where he had grown up. Preaching when he could at Ebenezer, he also served as president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, located a few blocks away on Auburn, and even taught a few courses at Morehouse.

His return pleased his parents. His father had always wanted him to become co-pastor at Ebenezer. When violence in Montgomery threatened the younger King's family, Daddy King had strongly urged his son to come back to Atlanta. Although not all Atlantans appreciated the achievements of the city's most famous resident, the younger King felt comfortable in a world where his father was still a protective presence.

During the last months of his life, Dr. King talked with his parents about the possibility of assassination, but insisted, "I have to go on with my work, no matter what happens now, because my involvement is too complete to stop."

Daddy King recalled that he and Alberta "ached when he left that evening, deep inside, and though we tried to comfort each other with small talk about neighbors and church folks and even our earliest hours together, nothing could remove the unspoken pain we were sharing."

When Dr. King's life was cut short in Memphis, his body was taken to Atlanta for a funeral at Ebenezer and, ultimately, for burial next to the church on the grounds of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change. Having traveled throughout the world and having seen the promised land of the American future, he fittingly was brought to rest in the nurturing setting that had prepared him for his mission.