

Martin Luther King Jr.: The Morehouse Years

As an undergraduate at Morehouse College, Martin Luther King Jr. was never a strong student. He preferred to party and use his college years to hone his oratorical skills.

by Clayborne Carson

IN SEPTEMBER 1944 Martin Luther King Jr. returned to Atlanta to begin his studies at Morehouse College. While the buildings on the small campus had not changed much since the days when his father had been a student, the goals and standing of the college had. Since Benjamin E. Mays had become president in 1940, Morehouse had begun to reverse the decline that began during John Hope's final years. Under this new leadership, the college regained its earlier vitality. Not only did Mays — the first Morehouse president with an earned doctoral degree — instill a belief in its students that "Morehouse men" were distinctive in their talent and commitment to racial uplift, but he also worked hard to improve the quality of the faculty, increasing salaries and encouraging professors to pursue doctorates.

Mays was also an innovative, politically engaged scholar. His first book, *The Negro's God*, published in 1938, was a pioneering study of African-American Christianity, and reflected Mays' enthusiasm for prophetic, social-gospel religious teachings. A trip to India increased his appreciation of the philosophy of Mohandas K. Gandhi, who had given the Indian masses "a new conception of courage." Mays asserted that "when an oppressed race ceases to be afraid, it is free." He often criticized American Christian institutions for not challenging segregation. Believing that black colleges should be "experiment stations in democratic living," Mays challenged Morehouse students to struggle against segregation rather than accommodate themselves to it. Noting the difficulty many students encountered in developing "a critical but secure religious position" to replace the orthodox religious views of their precollege years, he argued that black colleges should seek to inform students about the importance of the church in African-American life. Students needed "con-

tact with people who demonstrate in their person the fact that religion counts," Mays argued, adding that "a religion which ignores social problems will in time be doomed." Religion must "give direction to life — a direction that is neither communistic nor fascistic — not even the direction of a capitalistic individualism."

Mays inspired a generation of Morehouse students who gathered for his Tuesday morning lectures in which he stressed intellectual excellence, religious piety, and commitment to racial advancement. He later recalled King as

"One Morehouse classmate said, 'He knew almost intuitively how to move an audience.'"

an eager listener, often responding to his lectures by debating certain points. These contacts led to a "real friendship which was strengthened

by visits to his home and by fairly frequent chats." King later described Mays as "one of the great influences in my life."

King's enthusiasm for Mays' teachings developed only gradually. There is little evidence that King exhibited a serious interest in his studies during most of his stay at Morehouse. Younger than most of the other 204 students in his class and uncertain about his career plans, King initially paid more attention to his social life than to his classwork. Although he lived with his parents and did not join a fraternity, King was socially active. Not only was he president of the sociology club and a member of the debating team, student council, glee club, and minister's union, but he also joined the Morehouse chapter of the NAACP and played on the Butler Street YMCA basketball team.

Among King's first acquaintances at the college was another Morehouse freshman, Walter R. McCall, a preministerial student five years older than King who would soon become his best friend. McCall recalled that King was an "ordinary student" during this period: "I don't think [King] took his studies *very* seriously, but seriously

enough to get by." King "loved the lighter side of life," even when it meant disobeying his father's injunctions against sinful behavior. "Many times [his father] opposed our dancing and things like that," McCall remembered, "but he would slip off anyway and go. Many times he and I as well as his sister and some more girls would congregate at his house while his Daddy was at church and we'd put on a party."

Documentary evidence regarding King's studies at Morehouse is scanty, making his intellectual development there difficult to trace. Later accounts suggest, however, that he benefited from Morehouse's liberal arts curriculum and from the personal attention of the school's faculty. During his first year, for example, he received the valuable help of Professor Gladstone Lewis Chandler in preparing for the John L. Webb oratorical competition, in which he won second prize in 1946 and 1948.

During King's second year, he took his first course with sociologist Walter Richard Chivers, an outspoken critic of segregation, who became King's adviser when he chose sociology as his major. Chivers wrote several articles during the 1940s about racial discrimination and the role of black leaders in the struggle against



Benjamin E. Mays

In the summer after his junior year at Morehouse, King wrote a letter to the editor of the Atlanta Constitution. "We want and are entitled to the basic rights and opportunities of American citizens."

oppression. He praised social reformers, such as Harlem's militant minister, Adam Clayton Powell, but offered caustic criticism of cautious "talented tenth Negro leaders." Although his discussions of working-class issues were clearly influenced by Marx, Chivers did not openly advocate socialism, and he rejected communism as akin to totalitarian fascism. His emphasis on the economic roots of racism certainly contributed to King's increasingly anti-capitalist sentiments. As classmate Lerone Bennett Jr. later recalled, King saw Chivers' notion "that money was the root not only of evil but also of race" confirmed when he took a summer job and observed that blacks were paid less than whites performing the same tasks.

King's growing awareness of social and political issues is evident in the few writings that survive from his undergraduate years. In a letter to the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* written the summer before his junior year, for example, he reacted to a series of racially motivated murders in Georgia. King summarized black goals: "We want and are entitled to the basic rights and opportunities of

American citizens: the right to earn a living at work for which we are fitted by training and ability; equal opportunities in education, health, recreation, and similar public services; the right to vote; equality before the law; some of the same courtesy and good manners that we ourselves bring to all human relations."

Invited during his junior year to write an article for the February 1947 Founders' Day issue of the school paper, the *Maroon Tiger*, King used the opportunity to warn students about their "misconception of the purpose of education.

Most of the 'brethren' think that education should equip them with the proper instruments of exploitation so that they can forever trample over the masses. Still others think that education should furnish them with noble ends rather than means to an end." To save men from "the morass of propaganda" was "one of the chief aims of education," according to King. "The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically." Another essay, written at the end of his junior year, addressed the topic "Economic Basis for Cultural Conflict" and appeared in a departmental journal Chivers helped produce.

During his junior year, King's evolving sociopolitical views merged with the new understanding of Christian theology he gained from religion professor George D. Kelsey, a theologian widely known and respected for his annual Institute for the Training and Improvement of Baptist Ministers. While King Sr. described Kelsey as a teacher who "saw the pulpit as a place both for drama, in the old-fashioned, country Baptist sense, and for the articulation of philosophies that address the problems of society," the younger King was attracted to his professor's tough-minded approach to theological issues. Kelsey (who gave King his only A at Morehouse) stressed the implications of the Christian gospel for social and racial reform while also insisting that the Kingdom of God could "never be

Martin Luther King Jr.'s Grades at Morehouse College: One "A" in Four Years

1944-45 First Semester		1945-46 First Semester		1946-47 First Semester		1947-48 First Semester	
Course	Grade	Course	Grade	Course	Grade	Course	Grade
Introductory biology	C	Elementary French	C	Shakespeare	B	Introduction to philosophy	C
Composition and reading	C	Introduction to general literature	C	American literature	C	Classics in English	B
History of civilization	C	General psychology	C	Intermediate French	C	Social institutions	B
Freshman mathematics	B	Matter and energy	B	Bible	B	Social legislation	B
Church history	C	Introduction to sociology	B	Contemporary social trends in America	B	Statistics	Inc.
Freshman hygiene	P	Physical education	P	Social psychology	B		
Freshman orientation	P					Second Semester	
Physical education	P					Course	Grade
Second Semester		Second Semester		Second Semester		Introduction to philosophy	B
Course	Grade	Course	Grade	Course	Grade	Principles and methods of statistics	C
Introductory biology	C	Elementary French	B	American literature	B	English fundamentals	P
Composition and reading	C	Introduction to general literature	C	Intermediate French	D	Seminar in sociology	P
History of civilization	C	Educational psychology	C	Bible	A	Intercultural relations	B
Freshman mathematics	B	Matter and energy	B	Social anthropology	B	Language and thinking	C
Church history	C	Introductory sociology	B	Seminar in sociology	P	Urban sociology	B
Freshman hygiene	P	Physical education	P				
Freshman orientation	P						
Physical education	P						

realized fully within history" because the sinful nature of man "distorts and imposes confusion even on his highest ideas." Kelsey's writings of the 1940s evinced a personal struggle to reconcile the Protestant notion of individual salvation with the realization that religious individualism often encourages pessimism about progressive social reform. He also provided some of the intellectual resources King needed to resolve the conflict between the religious traditions of his youth and the secular ideas he had learned in college. As King later commented, that conflict continued until he took Kelsey's course and realized "that behind the legends and myths of the Book were many profound truths which one could not escape."

"I came to see that God had placed a responsibility upon my shoulders and the more I tried to escape it, the more frustrated I would become."

The influence of Chivers and Kelsey was evident in an essay entitled "Ritual" that King probably wrote during his senior year. Reflecting his self-conscious straddling of the line between his social science training and his religious

vocation, King acknowledged that, although as a pretheological student he would be expected "to defend certain aspects of sacred ritual, therefore becoming unscientific," his aim was "to be as unbiased and scientific as possible."

While King's enthusiasm for Kelsey's critical approach to biblical studies set him apart from his father's scriptural literalism, it also enabled him to think more seriously about an idea he had previously rejected: entering the ministry. King Sr. had always wanted both sons to become ministers and eventually, perhaps, to serve as pastors for Ebenezer Baptist Church, but he also recognized the wisdom of his wife's entreaties that their children be allowed to make their own career choices. He later expressed the hope that his sons could make use of his connections among Baptists — "family ties, school and fraternal relationships, the so-called hometown connections that kept phones ringing and letters moving in consideration of help requested and granted, favors offered and accepted. The world is too tough for anyone to think of challenging it alone." Yet A.D. and M.L. were unwilling to conform to paternal expectations: A.D. dropped out of Morehouse before deciding on a ministerial career, and King Jr. spent his first three years at Morehouse planning to become a

Deciphering the Morehouse Mystique

Many decades ago Dr. Benjamin E. Mays, then president of Morehouse College, devised a set of institutional principles that came to be called the "Morehouse Mystique." Mays' precepts for students laid heavy emphasis on character building and cultural development. Also, the college promised its students academic excellence and expert teaching. All students were assigned faculty mentors who were charged with providing academic support and career guidance. Morehouse graduates were expected to become leaders and particularly to use their Morehouse training to benefit the black community.

In 1995 Walter E. Massey, who had served a distinguished term as head of the National Science Foundation and later as provost at the University of California, arrived in Atlanta to assume the presidency of Morehouse College. At that time the Morehouse image had been severely tarnished. In 1994 three students were murdered on or near the Morehouse campus. In addition, an audit of the school's finances had led to the resignation of Morehouse president



Walter E. Massey
President, Morehouse College

Leroy Keith and chairman of the board of trustees, James Hudson. The audit unearthed serious financial irregularities.

Massey was entrusted with the huge task of repairing the college's reputation. Students, parents, faculty, and alumni needed assurance that the college would restore the Morehouse Mystique and its heavy emphasis on academic excellence, character building, and cultural development.

Today Morehouse College is one of only five all-male colleges in the United States. More than 99 percent of its student body is black. In the past 20 years, enrollment at Morehouse has doubled to 3,000 students. The college receives about 3,000 applications yearly for a freshman class of about 800 students. Prominent graduates include former Atlanta mayor Maynard Jackson and filmmaker Spike Lee. The only student ever to receive a Rhodes scholarship from a historically black college was the 1994 selection of Morehouse student Nima Warfield. But much of the Morehouse Mystique today rests on the simple fact that the college is the alma mater of Martin Luther King Jr.

lawyer, or perhaps a physician, but certainly not a minister like his father.

King Jr.'s reluctance to become a minister stemmed largely from his rejection of religious practices that appealed to emotions rather than to the intellect. His persistent questioning of literal interpretations of biblical texts evolved during his Morehouse years into criticism of tradi-

"King Jr.'s reluctance to become a minister stemmed from his rejection of religious practices that appealed to emotions rather than to the intellect."

tional Baptist teachings. He later wrote that his college days were "very exciting ones," especially the first two years when "the shackles of fundamentalism were removed from my body." Although his break with orthodoxy may have strengthened his determination not to become a minister, it also opened him to liberalism as a potentially acceptable religious orientation. King wrote later that the circumstances of his call to the ministry were unusual, for even though he had experienced a sense of calling, he continued

to waver about his career choice during his first three years at Morehouse. He recalled wondering "whether [the church] could serve as a vehicle to modern thinking. I wondered whether religion, with its emotionalism in Negro churches, could be intellectually respectable as well as emotionally satisfying."

King was probably leaning toward a career as a minister by the end of his junior year, but making a final decision was nevertheless difficult. On the one hand, he could not ignore his father's hopes and his friends' expectations. His fellow students who heard him speak at campus events admired his oratorical skills; as one classmate recalled, "he knew almost intuitively how to move an audience." On the other hand, he continued to deprecate the emotionalism he associated with Baptist preaching. While remaining skeptical of his father's doctrinal conservatism, King saw his father as a model. He would later explain that King Sr.'s influence "had a great deal to do with my going in the ministry. He set forth a noble example that I didn't [mind] following." Perhaps even more influential than his father, Mays and Kelsey were also crucial role models. "Both were ministers, both deeply religious, and yet both were learned

men, aware of all the trends of modern thinking." King Jr. later explained. "I could see in their lives the ideal of what I wanted a minister to be." His decision was, in short, a summation of King's earlier experiences and influences.

It came neither by some miraculous vision nor by some blinding light experience on the road of life. Moreover, it was a response to an inner urge that gradually came upon me. This urge expressed itself in a desire to serve God and humanity, and the feeling that my talent and my commitment could best be expressed through the ministry.

King told close friends at Morehouse of his intention to become a minister, but he probably continued to debate the idea during the summer. Returning with other students to the Connecticut tobacco farm where he had worked in 1944, King once again led weekly religious gatherings. While there, he telephoned his mother to tell her of his decision. Upon his return to Atlanta at summer's end, he discussed his plans with other family members before finally telling his father. "I finally decided to accept the challenge to enter the ministry," King recalled. "I came to see that God had placed a responsibility upon my shoulders and the more I tried to escape it the more frustrated I would become." That autumn King Jr. delivered a trial sermon at Ebenezer, attracting a large and appreciative audience. "M.L. had found himself," King Sr. recalled. "I could only thank God, pretty regularly, for letting me stay around long enough to be there." Immediately after the sermon, the Ebenezer congregation licensed him to preach, and he joined the church as associate pastor to his father. During his final year at Morehouse, he preached occasionally at Ebenezer before being ordained as a minister in February 1948.

After King decided to become a minister and to pursue graduate studies at a seminary, he became more serious and focused during his final year at Morehouse. In addition to Kelsey and Mays, Samuel W. Williams provided King with another example of an academically trained, socially committed minister. A leader of the People's Progressive Party in Georgia, Williams supported the presidential campaign of Henry A. Wallace. King took an introductory philosophy course from Williams, who also preached at local churches. During his senior year, King's commitment to social change was strengthened when he joined the Intercollegiate Council, an interracial student group that met monthly at Emory University to discuss various issues. Despite opposition from his father, King

actively participated in these meetings. The encounters with white students helped King overcome the antiwhite feelings he had felt since childhood.

Editor's Note: In the spring of 1948, Martin Luther King Jr. graduated from Morehouse College with a bachelor's degree in sociology. The next fall he enrolled at the Crozer Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. In the next issue of JBHE, we will publish an article on his years as a graduate student.

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Apartheid's Most Celebrated Martyr

The Police Officers Proclaimed Their Malefactions



Steve Biko
1947-1977

The killers of anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko have now been identified. This ends nearly two decades of mystery about who murdered one of apartheid's most celebrated martyrs. The identification marks an extraordinary breakthrough for South Africa's Truth Commission. Five apartheid-era security police officers, whose names had been unofficially linked to Biko's death for several years, have confessed to the Truth

and Reconciliation Commission as to their role in the Biko killing as well as their complicity with at least nine other police slayings of blacks in the Eastern Cape region. According to Alex Boraine, vice chairman of the truth panel, "they shot, stabbed, mutilated, and burned several prominent local activists in a series of assassinations which have baffled investigators at the highest level."

In September 1977, Biko was beaten until he was nearly comatose by Port Elizabeth police officers and then thrown into his cell. Several days later, Biko, who had received no medical attention, was transported, naked and in chains, to a prison in Pretoria, 750 miles away. A few hours after he arrived, he died on a stone floor in his prison cell.

The five officers who confessed to their role in the killing of Biko are Harold Snyman, Gideon Nieuwoudt, R. Marx, J. Bencke, and Daantjie Siebert. Before testifying before the Truth Commission, the five received amnesty for their crimes. The officers defended their actions by claiming that they "were operating within the culture of the time."

Illustration: William Bramhall