

Reflections on a Rebel's Journey

Samuel DuBois Cook
President
Dillard University

Editor's Note: This essay served as the introduction to *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography* by Benjamin E. Mays. Samuel Cook was a student of Mays and was truly moved by his philodophy and teachings. This essay sums up the relationship between the two, and we hope that the reader wil be able to discern the "real" Mays.

I unabashedly revered Bennie Mays for his genuine contributions, strength of character, gifts of mind, vision, ability to grow and courage to change, creative restlessness and zest for life, stubborn moral courage, prophetic imagination, deep commitment to social justice, boundless energy and eagerness to tackle new tasks, devotion to academic excellence, capacity for independence of thought and critical judgment, single-minded commitment to the mot precious and enduring values of the human enterprise, and life-long romance with the world of higher possibilities. He was a wise man. His spirit was indomitable, his will inexhaustible.

He was a powerful disturber of the human conscience and an implacable foe of every form of complacency, mediocrity, self-righteousness, oral conceit, and hypocrisy—individual and collective. His prophetic concerns were not limited to technical moral and religious dimensions but extend to the whole institutional life and process of culture and history. He was a hard taskmaster. He was mighty difficult to please because of his vision of,

This essay was taken from the book *Born to Rebel* by Benjamin Mays and is reprinted with permission of the University of Georgia Press, owners of the copyright.

and commitment to, the higher possibilities of human life—the deep longing for something better. Mays was a modern prophet.

His life, echoing and expressing the tragedy and the glory of the black encounter, was that of desperately walking the tightrope in several dimensions of “being” and “becoming,” believing and doubting, Spartan immersion in activity and stoic resignation to the inevitable continuity and change, rebellion and adjustment, the saying of “yes” and “no” to history and culture. It was been rough going, but what a magnificent and inspiring odyssey and product! The story tells us something profound about the human spirit at its best—richness, vitality, creativity, resourcefulness, resilience, and wonder.

The achievements of the man would be astonishing for anybody; they were almost incredible in light of the environment of his childhood and formative years. Dr. Mays had earned an international reputation in religion, higher education, public speaking, public life, and the struggle for social justice. He was honored by Presidents of the United States.

A tireless worker, he had authored more than half a dozen books, contributed chapters to some twenty more, penned about one hundred articles, and produced hundreds of reports, pamphlets, and other materials aimed at specialized audiences. Since the mid-1940's, he had written a weekly newsletter column. A silver-tongued orator and eloquent preacher, he had delivered thousands of public speeches and sermons. His list of honors and awards is legendary.

Dr. Mays had, for example, received more than twenty-five honorary degrees from a variety of institutions of higher learning. He graciously refused the first honorary degree offered him. He did so on the ground that his achievements then did not make him deserving of the honor. His standards of excellence were high both for himself and for others.

The man was inexhaustible. He was, as Jacques Maritain said of the Angelic Doctor, always about his Father's business. He lived in the world not of memory but of anticipation, not of the land conquered but of new challenges and new worlds to conquer. He was driven by higher possibilities. It has been well said that to dwell in the past is to stop work and what is life without any new tasks which drive us.

So, at the age of seventy-five, Bennie Mays, always eager to serve his fellows, responded to popular pressure to run for his first elective public office—a seat on the Atlanta Board of Education. Although he did only a small amount of campaigning, the election returns gave him a landslide victory. A few weeks later, Atlanta confronted one of the worst crises in its

history, involving a court-ordered comprehensive plan for the desegregation of the public schools. Both racial communities were up in arms. Tensions mounted. Fears increased. Doubts grew. White opposition was organized, articulate, and emotion-laden. Hundreds of teachers allegedly threatened to resign. Parents were upset, and many said they would withdraw their children from the schools. Mass rallies were held. Large numbers of students, encouraged by high public officials, marched on the State Capitol. Because of the commanding role of leadership in the resolution of social conflict, the election of the new president of the School Board took on crucial significance. Citizens waited.

Since Dr. Mays commanded near-universal respect and faith in the Atlanta community, his fellow members elected him the first black man to serve as president of the Atlanta Board of Education. Accordingly, Dr. Mays devoted massive time and energy to the improvement of public education in Atlanta. That is a mark of the character, concerns, and commitment of the man. The only thing "retirement" meant to him was a shifting of the chief residence and focus of responsibility. In a variety of capacities, he was as involved, busy, and energetic as ever. His life, therefore, continued to be full of excitement, meaning, zest and productivity. It was not dulled by the passage of time.

Dr. Mays' autobiography is a remarkable document. It is a moving account, laced with wonder, grace, and dignity, of the spiritual, intellectual, and social journey of a great human being. The book is not self-serving. It is a portrait of the human heart, mind, and spirit embarked on a magnificent adventure—sensitively and creatively encountering self, men, events, circumstances, and perceptions of ultimate reality. It is the sage of a dreamer in a land of ambiguity, ambivalence, and "impossible possibility."

But the book is more, much more, than the odyssey of one man. It is a collective autobiography, disclosing the inner and outer experiences of Negroes—their lonely and tragic search for incorporation into the promise and performance of American life, their long night of struggle for equality of citizenship and humanity. In a gentle and luminous way, it captures the essence of the black experience in the New World—the agonies, wounds, fears, tears, humiliations, hopes, anguish, triumphs, inching progressive movements, inner terrors of mind and spirit, exilement at home, burdens, setbacks, breakthroughs, affirmations, and boundless faith in the ideals and promises of the land. Mays went to the heart of the spiritual adventure of black people.

"The first thing I can remember," Mays observes, "is a white mob looking for a Negro to lynch." The statement is fraught with symbolic meaning as well as historical significance. Every reflective and sensitive black man, in the deeper levels of being, is haunted by the symbolic mob of racism perpetually flashing on the screen of consciousness and sensibility; the picture is inescapable—just as Dr. Mays cannot escape the memory of the physical mob during his childhood.

The book is also a social and historical document about America—particularly the legacy, depth, and persistence of white racism with all its tragic consequences not only for black people but for the whole country as well. It probes and illuminates the tangled roots and many-dimensional character of the current racial crisis. This country "is tramping out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored." It is experiencing the feedback of three and a half centuries of racial injustice and tyranny. The anger, bitterness, resentment, and hatred in large sectors of the black population the fruit of a long period of oppression, insensitivity, neglect, and moral hypocrisy. The chickens of the years are coming home to roost. Mays tells the story in beautiful and eloquent language.

A chief virtue of the book is that it provides perspective. Historical perspective is crucial. It liberates us from the tyranny and narrow throes of the moment. This book reminds us both of the progress that has been made in race relations over the past few decades and of the distance the country has to go before equality of opportunity and dignity cleanses, enriches, and fulfills the land. And Dr. Mays points the way out of the racial tragedy.

What is the meaning of this man's life? The mind cries out for an answer, even as it perceives the perils lurking in the search. Since the life of every human being is filled with mystery and wonder attempts to deal with questions of the meaning thereof are risky and hazardous business. But I would hardly show fidelity to the teachings of Bennie Mays if I failed to try.

The chief meaning of Dr. Mays' life is the significance of personal responsibility in the human encounter and adventure. It is an affirmation of ethical individualism. The ideals we cherish at the core of our selfhood, the dreams that drive us by day and haunt us by night, the industry and discipline we muster, our will and intelligence, the choices we make, our vision of possibilities, and the faith we live by make a difference in the quality of our lives and the level of our achievements. No shallow determinism can do justice to the radical freedom (within, of course, limits) of

the individual persons. And to the extent that men possess freedom, to that extent they have responsibility. The human spirit is not ordained by the nature of things to be enslaved to the structures of culture. Reinhold Niebuhr has observed that, paradoxically, men are both creators and creatures of the historical process.

Another structure of meaning in the life of Bennie Mays is another ancient, though often neglected, truth. Individuals, particularly those in strategic positions of organizational leadership, have enormous influence on the lives of others—especially the young. Imitation of systems of thought and belief and patterns of behavior is a fundamental fact of life. We imitate, appropriate, and incorporate into our own structure of meaning the values and visions of others, particularly those we respect and esteem. What we are and believe—or appear to be and to affirm—spill over into the lives of others and flow into the rivers and currents of their being. Individuals' lives, therefore, have significant bearing on, and consequences for, others who appropriate their meanings and values. Bennie Mays has touched, enriched, and inspired, in various ways and degrees, the lives of a staggering, indeterminate number of people. Martin Luther King Jr. is simply the most famous one. Imitation and citation, consciously and unconsciously, of Dr. Mays is a common occurrence. He has a rather special gift of memorable epigrammatic utterance and powers of persuasion and motivation.

A third meaning of Dr. Mays is the tragedy of racism. Racism is a search for meaning that is, in a variety of ways, self-defeating. It diminishes life. It impoverishes funded experiences, knowledge, and shared values. It militates against the whole of community. Long ago, Myrdal noted that the "Negro genius is imprisoned in the Negro problem (Myrdal, 1941:28). Because racism is a demonic evil—Reinhold Niebuhr calls it a form of original sin (in Davis and Goods, 1960:232)—Dr. Mays has spent endless time, energy, and talent trying to combat it. The investment has been more than justified. For racism is a problem of human spirit.

But if racism were not such a cancerous reality and social force, Dr. Mays could have spent his time, industry, and gifts of mind on the ultimate issues of religious and philosophical thought. His union of seminal intellect and inexhaustible energy perhaps marked him as a potential Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, Karl Barth, Rudolph Bultmann, Nicolas Berdyaev, Josiah Royce, Martin Buber, Jacques Maritain, Emil Brunne, or Walter Rauschenbusch. He could have added significant original propositions to the corpus of religious and philosophical thought. Consequently, the intellectual enterprise is the loser.

Finally, the life of Benjamin Elijah Mays suggests that while the life of reason may be out of style, it is not out of clout and muscle; it is not devoid of creative power and productivity. It is filled with constructive possibilities. The old ship of reason while not without handicaps in negotiating the turbulent waters of the contemporary world, is not completely disabled. It is a good and secure ship—built especially for the troubled waters of the human journey. It is the most reliable ship in the whole harbor of civilization. It is old but ever young. There is no substitute for rational and experimental exploration and evaluation of alternative conditions, possibilities, and consequences, the cool calculation of the probably consequences of each option, the counting of the cost, and the bringing of what is out of sight into view.

To a degree, the message of this remarkable rebel and dreamer has had a transformative impact. Seeds planted in the garden of the continuum of human experience have a way of sprouting, multiplying, and bearing fruit in their own good time. Showing fidelity to the life of reason, Dr. Mays has been a catalyst and instrument of social change for the better—in race relations, education, and religious meaning and relevance. He was, of course, quite dissatisfied with his impact, but his contributions have improved, in a significant measure, the quality of life and promise in the land.

For decades, Dr. Mays quoted the prophet Micah: "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" The feeling is inescapable that the words had a peculiar meaning for Dr. Mays, summing up his total philosophy of life, and expressing the ultimate depths of his being. "The ideals cherished in the souls of men," said Whitehead, "enter into the character of their actions" (Whitehead, 1955:49).

To the limits of human possibility, Bennie Mays did justice, loved kindness, and walked humbly with his God. Neither the heights of achievements and the bright lights of triumph, nor the depths of disappointment and sorrow were able to separate him from these ideals. Perhaps it is true, after all, that, in this tragic world, a good conscience is our only sure reward. Bennie Mays deserved a good conscience.

But—and this is symbolic of the paradox at the heart of the ethical life—he could never enjoy a good conscience. Only men of genuine ethical sensitivities and deep and abiding sympathies are truly and constantly troubled by the miseries, woes, tragedies, and follies—individual and collective—of their human condition. Their own heroic efforts are insuffi-

cient to eradicate their moral tension and agony. Their sense of guilt is incurable. For it is born of their moral view of the universe and their anguish over the predicament of men and society. The pangs of conscience are always there—nudging, twinging, pressing, demanding more, reminding of the ethics of duty. They cannot have an easy conscience when they know that a better life is a cosmic imperative and within existential reach. Ethically insensitive men are free to wallow in the trough of indifference, moral complacency, and self-righteousness, but the sensitive and creative is ever demanding more of itself, something better, nobler, purer. It is dynamic, not static.

Because of a divine moral restlessness implanted in his Puritan conscience and cultivated and cherished in the depths of his being, Bennie Mays was always morally restless, anxious, and demanding. While understanding the foibles and moral afflictions of human nature, he was a moral perfectionist. He could achieve moral peace; his ethical consciousness was too deep, intense, and demanding for that. The world contains too many evils and therefore challenges for such a man to take a moral vacation. He was too self demanding to have a complacent conscience. Too much remained to be done for him to ever become a spectator of the events, struggles, and encounters of the contemporary science. His vision of the higher possibilities of human life was too grand; his zest for life too immense; and his concern for the lot of his fellows too vast and deep for him to have a satisfied conscience. He was moved by a vision of nobler things that never let him go; neither did he let it go. He grips the vision and the vision him.

It was a precious, humbling, and unforgettable experience to know Bennie Mays. It was also, at times, somewhat embarrassing to us ordinary mortals whose vision of life is less majestic and imperative or who find habitation of the mountaintop—beyond periods of brief duration—too dazzling.

References

- Myrdal, Gunnar. 1944. *An American Dilemma*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Davis, Harry and Robert C. Goods. 1960. *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*. New York: John Wiley & Sons
- Whitehead, Alfred North. 1955. *Adventures of Ideas*. Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press

My mother believed that God answered prayers. Though not so credulous or optimistic about prayer as she, I was nonetheless greatly influenced by her prayer life. I sought a way out through prayer. I prayed frequently as I worked in the field and many nights alone in the moonlight. I often plowed to the end of the row, hitched the mule to a tree, and went down into the woods to pray. On moonlight nights, I would leave the house and go into the field and pray. My prayers were all variations of the same theme: God enable me to get away to school. My desire for an education was not only a dream but a goal that drove and prodded me, day and night. I left the farm not to escape it but to find my world, to become myself.

I accepted the prayer jargon of the older people. I asked God to move out of my way "every hindrance and cause" which kept me from getting an education. Afterward I was sorry that I had prayed that way, for if God had answered my prayers as spoken, Father would have been the first obstacle to be moved out.

from **Born to Rebel**