

Mays Transcendant and Transcending Mays

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The famous African American theologian and Morehouse alumnus, Howard Thurman, has written that:

The time and place of a man's life on earth are the time and place of his body, but the meaning and significance of his life is as vast and far-reaching as his gifts, his times and the passionate commitment of all his powers can make it (Thurman, 1979:1).

The time of life on this earth for Benjamin Elijah Mays was the years between 1894 and 1984. The places of his life were several because he traveled frequently and widely. But the places most closely associated with his life for considerable periods of time were South Carolina, Bates College, the University of Chicago, Howard University and Atlanta, Georgia. It was in Atlanta where, for almost four decades, he demonstrated his longest and greatest commitment to strong and visionary leadership in the field of education. Therefore, it is fitting that this final session of the celebration of his legacy will explore his impact on education. Because of Dr. Mays' illustrious career as a dean, college president, chairman of the Board of Education of a major metropolitan school system; and because of his renown as a gifted orator and preacher of the Gospel it is very easy to lose sight of the fact that he was first a classroom teacher. In 1921, Dr. Mays came to

Morehouse College, where he taught college mathematics and high school algebra for three years. In his autobiography, *Born to Rebel*, Dr. Mays writes this about his teaching at Morehouse:

I made history at Morehouse by teaching the first course in calculus ever to be given there. The times do change! (Mays, 1971)

After receiving a master's degree in 1925, Dr. Mays joined the faculty of South Carolina State College, his high school alma mater, as a teacher of English. He remained at South Carolina State for one year.

I think it is appropriate that I mention Dr. Mays' tenure as a college teacher because I believe that this is where his impact on education, especially for African Americans, actually began and took roots. Throughout his lifetime, Dr. Mays was ever the teacher, encouraging young men and women "to reach for the stars." Perhaps, his greatest impact on education was made by way of the many young lives he touched, inspired, challenged and sometimes dazzled through his personal contacts with them and through his speeches and writings. This is one way that the meaning and significance of his life transcends the grave.

It is appropriate that I make special mention of Dr. Mays' work as a college teacher in light of the small number of African Americans pursuing graduate study today. Over the past decade, the number of African Americans receiving the doctoral degree in all fields has either remained about the same or declined each year. This makes it extremely difficult for institutions of higher education to employ African American teachers and scholars who also could be role models for black students. Dr. Mays recognized the need for and importance of graduate education, especially for African Americans, and gave tireless efforts encouraging and assisting faculty and students at Morehouse College not just to pursue graduate study but to obtain a graduate degree.

No doubt Dr. Mays made his greatest impact on and contribution to higher education during his presidency of Morehouse College. As he says in his autobiography, his main reason for accepting the presidency of Morehouse college in 1940,

... was the challenge of the job. I thought I might get support from faculty, trustees, alumni and friends to move Morehouse forward. And after all, this was Morehouse where I had begun my teaching career nineteen years before. Many of the students I had known and taught there were making

their mark in the world I considered it an honor to be president of a college that had done 'so much with so little and so few.

I found a special, intangible something at Morehouse in 1921 which sent men out into life with a sense of mission, believing that they could accomplish whatever they set out to do... There is still this intangible something at Morehouse College. If it is ever lost, Morehouse will become "just another college." (Mays, 1971:104)

This was the credo of Dr. Mays as president of Morehouse College. He embodied it totally in all of his being and actions and communicated it to all who came under his influence—students, faculty, alumni, trustees and friends. Benjamin Mays had a great reverence for the human mind. He believed that the mind was man's greatest gift and must never be allowed to be idle or to be wasted. It was to be nurtured through serious study, prodigious research and investigation; trained through rigorous discipline and used to lift one's self and humanity to higher plateaus of fruitful living. He often counselled:

You are what you aspire to be, and not what you now are; you are what you do with your mind, and you are what you do with your youth. It is not your environment, it is you—the quality of your minds, the integrity of your souls, and the determination of your wills—that will decide your future and shape your lives. The man who out-thinks you, rules you (Mays, 1971:1-3).

Dr. Mays realized early in life the importance and value of excellence in education and this became his life-long goal and pursuit. The first written account in which he articulated this philosophy of excellence was in a speech given at a YMCA conference for African American boys at Benedict College in 1926. He said:

Young men, you must strive to be an agriculturalist, not a Negro agriculturalist! Strive to be a doctor, not a Negro doctor—just a doctor! Seek to serve your state, not as a Negro, but as a man. Aspire to be great, not [only] among Negroes, but among men. God knows I want to be a great teacher, not a Negro teacher, just a great teacher (Mays, 1971:104).

He certainly fostered that philosophy at Morehouse College. How often did I hear him say while I was a student there, that "if an academic

curriculum is not good enough for whites, it is not good enough for blacks. A college must be judged not only by excellent teachers, but by the spirit and philosophy which permeates it from top to bottom." Dr. Mays advocated a "special" kind of education. While embracing W.E.B. DuBois' theory of the talented tenth, Dr. Mays' conviction and contention were that knowledge must be undergirded with firm moral and ethical principles and values. Knowledge alone can become a double-edged sword. He says on one occasion:

I am uneasy about man because we have no guarantee that when we train a man's mind, we will train his heart; no guarantee that when we increase a man's knowledge, we will increase his goodness. There is no necessary correlation between knowledge and goodness (Mays, 1971:1).

Like the biblical prophets, Dr. Mays continually preached the need and efficacy of acquired knowledge undergirded with high moral and ethical principles. Both man's head and heart must be changed if his goodness is to show forth in his actions.

Reflecting on Dr. Mays' presidency of Morehouse College, one could establish that he imparted higher education in the following ways: (1) he imbued his presidency with complete integrity, high moral character and sound fiscal management; (2) he sought to Make his presidency one worthy of being emulated by other college presidents and educational managers.

When he became president of Morehouse College in 1940, the College had no endowment. In fact, a precious few, if any, black colleges had an endowment. Dr. Mays immediately set out to establish an endowment at Morehouse and openly encouraged other black colleges, especially the private ones, to do the same.

Also, in 1940, black colleges and universities in the South could not become members of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), the regional accrediting body for institutions of higher education. Instead, black colleges and universities were "approved" by SACS. Dr. Mays led and eventually won the fight for full membership of black colleges and universities in the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. He was never afraid to take a stand for a good and righteous cause.

This educator from South Carolina came to Atlanta in 1940 and seized the helm of a small, financially strapped college and within approxi-

mately three decades built it into a nationally recognized center of academic excellence and fiscal stability. Dr. E. A. Jones, in *A Candle in the Dark, a History of Morehouse College*, says of Dr. Mays' success at Morehouse:

The spectacular growth and expansion of Morehouse College since 1940 are due in large part to the man who became its sixth president....

No other president of Morehouse College has raised as much money, built as many buildings, added as much land to the campus, or done as much to raise teachers' salaries and enhance faculty morale as has Dr. Mays. He has won for Morehouse new friends who have contributed to its security, growth and expansion (Jones, 1967:1).

Dr. Mays was a tough taskmaster as many of us had the good or sometimes unpleasant occasion to find out. He always gave his best and demanded the same of others. So today, his challenge to us would be to transcend his accomplishments. He would remind us that "of him to whom much is given, even more is required. One must not rest on past achievements. He who would be as great as his predecessor must be greater."

As one who served as president of the Atlanta Board of Education and of Morehouse College, Dr. Mays would be greatly disturbed over the education of African Americans today. He would be disturbed, but not discouraged. He would summon all who would hear him to join efforts to solve this problem. His abiding faith in the redeemability of humankind would be the motivating force behind his efforts.

The legacy of this great educator, philosopher, activist and man of God challenges each of us here today to transcend his accomplishments. To do less will be to subvert the goal and purpose of our being in this place at this time. As he has reminded us so eloquently:

God has sent every man and every woman into the world to do something unique, something distinctive and ... if he or she does not do it, it will never be done and the world will be the loser (Mays, 1971).

Even now his spirit summons us from the grave to exceed the good done by our predecessors. A tall order indeed! But Benjamin E. Mays issued tough orders and dared himself and others to achieve them.

*This statement was written in 1967 prior to the presidencies of Hugh M. Gloster, Leroy Keith and Walter Massey.

He would be quick to remind us, African Americans, that we are better educated today than ever before, better off economically than ever before (the wide disparity between the incomes of whites and blacks notwithstanding), and black political power is a reality. Thus the question before us is, "Do we have the will to use these resources and to what ends?"

Mays' life was a model of excellence in academic pursuits, of courage and perseverance in action, of love and compassion for one's fellowman and of deep and abiding faith in God. His words, spoken and written, provide us with encouragement, strength and enlightenment for the present and hope for the future as expressed in the following quote:

As we face the unpredictable future, we do so in the faith that our objectives are sound, that our means of achieving them are practicable, and that man and God will assist us all the way (Mays, 1971).

References

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