

## Benjamin Elijah Mays: A Perspective

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I recall attending chapel five times a week and a sixth day on Sunday, since I was in the Sunday Morning Choir. Pop Dansby sat in the balcony with his chart of the seating arrangement and checked off those who were not present. As you progressed through the years from freshman to senior, your seating was moved closer to the podium.

As a freshman, coming by train from Nashville, Tennessee, I found my first day at Morehouse memorable. My first task after getting off the train was to find a taxi to the college, and, growing up in the segregated South, I knew to go to the section where the black taxi drivers were located. After finally negotiating the ride, I arrived at Morehouse College in a severe rain storm which convinced me that Graves Hall was about to slide down the hill. I entered Graves Hall and came face to face with Mrs. Archer, who looked at me and said, "What do you want?" "I came to get a room assignment," I said.

This began an amazing journey that continues to positively influence my life today. This influence began on the first Tuesday in Chapel when I first heard Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays. He was standing erect, tall—an imposing figure—as he said: "I welcome you, Men of Morehouse College." I recall this reverberating in my mind, the concept of "Men of Morehouse." In the South, at that time, being called a man was rare and feeling empowered by that phrase was even more unusual.

Dr. Mays proceeded to introduce the faculty who stood behind him on the stage. He introduced every member of the faculty by name, degree, and where the degree was obtained, without notes. I was impressed! We were immediately introduced to our role models, our teachers, our mentors, our counselors, our advisors, and, ultimately, our friends. You had the immediate feeling that this was a supportive and nurturing environment where the president and faculty truly cared about you and your success in life.

After introducing the faculty, Dr. Mays began to speak about his vision for Morehouse and the heights to which he expected us to rise and the contributions he expected us to make in life. It is this vision that I would like to speak about today.

We celebrate the life and works of Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays who was president of Morehouse College from 1940 to 1967. He was a teacher; counselor; community, national, and international leader; minister; husband; and father to Morehouse men. He was a visionary who had a dream of Morehouse College that is yet to be fully realized; an understanding of the power of this vision that has inspired generations of Morehouse men.

Dr. Mays' earliest recollection was of the Phoenix Riot which began in Greenwood County, South Carolina, on November 8, 1898, and spread terror throughout the countryside. Many were lynched during this race riot. Dr. Mays said, in his book, *Born To Rebel*, "I remember a crowd of white men who rode up on horseback with rifles on their shoulders. I was with my father when they rode up, and I remember starting to cry. They cursed my father, drew their guns and made him salute, made him take off his hat and bow down to them several times. Then they rode away. I was not yet five years old, but I have never forgotten them."

How can a man experience this and not have it destroy his life? This early terror and later indignities were used by Dr. Mays as fuel to energize his determination that racial hatred would not stop him from his work and his destiny as an educator and leader.

In his early years, Dr. Mays realized his gift of oration when he began to speak in church as a youth and received his first ovation from the parishioners. This ability was to be the cornerstone of his influence. He honed his oratory and academic skills, leading to a bachelor's degree at Bates College and a doctorate at the University of Chicago.

While at the University of Chicago, a most unlikely event occurred that changed his life forever. John Hope, then president of Morehouse College, met Dr. Mays in the library at the University of Chicago and invited him to teach college mathematics at Morehouse. Dr. Mays reports that he was tempted by the "lucrative salary of \$1,200" to teach for eight months beginning in September 1921. This began a long and illustrious career as teacher and, later, president of Morehouse.

Dr. Mays spoke to us regularly about the five abiding values guiding the destiny of Morehouse men. These values are:

- maximizing the mind
- developing sound character
- maintaining spirituality
- committing to civic responsibility
- ensuring confidence of purpose

**Maximizing the Mind.** Dr. Mays had to be the first to say that "A mind is a terrible thing to waste." He believed this to his core and preached to us of our responsibilities to make maximum use of our talents in a creative and constructive way.

**Sound Character.** As important as it is to make the mind keen and sharp, the Morehouse emphasis has also been to develop men of integrity and sound character. A persisting concern of Dr. Mays throughout his life was how to become and remain a man of pride, dignity, and integrity in a society determined to rob (strip) him of these qualities. He insisted that Morehouse men be dependable, reliable, trustworthy, and honest—men who can be trusted to carry responsibility both in private and public life. He said: "It is dangerous to train only the mind without equally training good character."

**Spirituality.** As for maintaining our spirituality, mental and character development should be undergirded by a clear concept of the role of religion in the life of man. Religion was at the core of all behavior and the source of strength that empowers this action.

**Civic Responsibility.** A fourth emphasis, as Dr. Mays phrased it, is community responsibility. A good citizen is not only one who votes and pays taxes, but one who participates in affairs of the community and lends support to further the ideas of progress and democratic living.

**Confidence of Purpose.** Concerning the last of Dr. May's guiding values, despite the potentially crippling circumstance of racism and

poverty, Morehouse men go forth from this place with confidence in their future.

"They have been taught to not accept the ceiling as the limit, but the sky, and that a better tomorrow must be molded by them."

"They have learned well that a man's reach should exceed his grasp."

I would like to put these values in the context of concerns that I have, particularly with regard to the rise of the right and conservative trends in this country and their potential impact on our communities and our educational institutions. There is a conservative wave in this country fueled by the fears of average Americans that their basic livelihoods and families are being threatened by poor economic conditions and big government. These fears are being grossly distorted for the aims of the political "Right." Affirmative action is becoming the battle ground of this debate to the extent that facts and accuracy no longer become important in this war of words. It is, however, more than words, since it directly impacts us and our institutions.

Affirmative action has come to mean, for some conservatives, that minorities should be put in positions regardless of their ability to perform the skills necessary. I don't know about you, but when I go into an operation I want to know that the surgeon has the highly competent skills to perform this operation. Affirmative action has never meant hiring less qualified persons.

It refers to the ability of society to ensure that all persons be given full and equal opportunity to participate in all aspects of society. In the context of the array of populations in this country, participation should reflect this diversity.

In the famous study, *Workforce 2000*, it is postulated that the labor force will grow more slowly, become older, more female, and more non-white. By the year 2000, only 15% of the new entrants into the workforce will be white male compared with 47 percent non-white male. As *Time* magazine (April, 1994) stated, "in the 21st century ... racial and ethnic groups in the United States will outnumber whites for the first time. The 'Browning of America' will alter everything in society, from politics and education to industry, values, and culture...."

Efforts in this country should be made to increase the numbers of African Americans who receive quality education, not to fight to reduce these numbers by bogus claims of reverse discrimination. According to a new study completed for the Department of Labor, affirmative

action has caused very few claims of reverse discrimination. Rutgers University law professor, Alfred Blumrosen, says, "My findings poke holes in the theory that affirmative action programs unfairly benefit minorities at the expense of white workers." (*The New York Times*, March 31, 1995:A23.)

What does this mean for Morehouse men and the legacy of Dr. Benjamin Elijah Mays? It says, first, you must prepare your minds to be the best that you can be in your chosen field. Excellence should be your creed and work your companion.

The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation has long been involved in providing grants and fellowships to talented African American students. Another classmate of mine, Charles Merideth, received a full fellowship to study chemistry at the University of California at Berkeley where he earned a doctorate; he is now president of New York Technical College. Recently, the foundation has funded some fifteen Morehouse students who plan to receive graduate degrees in public policy or international affairs. Some, additionally, have received full funding from the junior year at Morehouse through the Master's degree in international affairs, and will then go into the foreign service.

We, at the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, feel that targeted grants to minority students are essential to ensure full representation in career fields where African Americans and other minorities are under-represented. The mosaic must be completed and all careers must reflect the diversity of America. Those who have prepared their minds should receive the resources needed to develop professional competence.

Secondly, it is not enough to prepare your mind, according to Dr. Mays, you must be of sound character as well. You cannot take short cuts in helping people. You cannot take short cuts in working with young children or students. I hear some people say that they give their children "quality time" and that is sufficient to ensure the healthy development of this youngster. There are no short cuts; you must be there when your child needs you. Our parents did it, while working two jobs if necessary.

When given a special award for scholarship as an African American, honor the obligation, even if it means that your first years as a physician are practiced in the inner city or on an Indian reservation. Continue your commitment to work in your community as a teacher, law-

yer, or counselor. Work in the Saturday Academy in Atlanta, be an active participant in the Morehouse tutorial program. Don't take advantage of the public trust.

Thirdly, sound character comes from religion and spirituality, the understanding that there is a higher power which orders our lives, allows us to avoid rampant narcissism—thinking only about ourselves—and to work honestly and dependably with others.

I was very fortunate because I was a member of the Glee Club quartet, and so was able to get to know Dr. Mays more personally. Many weekends the quartet would be put into the Morehouse station wagon with Dr. Mays sitting in the front seat on the passenger side. He would talk to us about his life, philosophy, and circumstances of the day. One weekend, we sang at his brother's funeral and traveled to his family's church. He talked about the role of religion and spirituality in our lives and how it guided all of his decisions in life.

Dr. Mays would say that a fourth emphasis at Morehouse is community responsibility. He said that we are privileged to receive a quality education, and, yes, we are singled out for special awards (we did not use the phrase affirmative action in those days), but with this opportunity must come responsibility to community and society.

This philosophy led us to the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who was a student of Dr. Mays. The spiritual understandings of Dr. King's teachings and commitment to community allowed us to participate in the "sit-in" movement that led to the desegregation of public facilities in Atlanta and around the country. Dr. Mays was one of the first to come to the side of our movement even when some would have had us expelled from college.

The fifth and final value suggested by Dr. Mays is confidence in the future and in the teachings of Morehouse College, being self-assured and clear in your direction; knowing truth and not being afraid to speak it; recognizing the writers of the Bell Curve, the hollow mantras of conservatism, and visceral oppositions to affirmative action as efforts to reconstruct reality.

The war continues, the battles wage on. We are confident in our struggle, and we stand on the shoulders of the great ones who have shown us the way. They guide our feet. We walk in their path.

"Guide my feet while I run this race for I don't want to run this race in vain." I hear the voices of Walter Chivers, E. A. Jones, E.B. Williams,

Henry McBay, Sam Williams, Wendell Whalum, James Birnie, and many others coming from the classrooms and hallowed halls of Morehouse. I hear the voices in the Chapel of A. Phillip Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr., Horace Bond, James Robinson, Samuel Nabrit, Howard Thurman, and I hear the voice of Benjamin Elijah Mays saying:

It will not be sufficient for Morehouse College to produce clever graduates, men fluent in speech and able to argue their way through; but rather honest men, men who can be trusted in public and in private—who are sensitive to the wrongs, the sufferings, and the injustices of society and who are willing to accept responsibility for correcting the ills.

One of my dreams came true at Bates. Through competitive experience, I had finally dismissed from my mind for all time the myth of the inherent inferiority of all Negroes and the inherent superiority of all whites—articles of faith to so many in my previous environment. I had done better in academic performances, in public speaking, and in argumentation and debate than the vast majority of my classmates. I concede academic superiority to not more than four in my class. I had displayed more initiative as a student leader than the majority of my classmates. Bates College made these things possible. Bates College did not “emancipate” me; it did the far greater service of making it possible for me to emancipate myself, to accept with dignity my own worth as a free man. Small wonder that I love Bates College! It was a moving and wonderful experience to return there in 1970 for my 50th class reunion.

from **Born to Rebel**