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NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH M. WILLIAM HOWARD, JR.

FOR THE

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INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

SHAUN ILLINGWORTH

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TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSE BRADDELL

Shaun Illingworth: This begins an oral history interview with Reverend M. William Howard, Jr., on January 16, 2019, in Lawrenceville, New Jersey, with Shaun Illingworth. Thank you very much for having me here today. To begin, can you tell me where and when you were born?

M. William Howard, Jr.: Yes, Shaun, I was born in Americus, Georgia, southwest Georgia, on March 3, 1946. Just a little side point, there was a colored hospital in my town. As a sign of the status of my family, I lived about two minutes walking from the colored hospital, but I was born in my mother's home. So, we didn't have the status even to be born in the colored hospital. How's that?

SI: Wow.

MWH: Yes.

SI: I am curious--who would use the hospital?

MWH: Well, I think people with adequate resources, financial resources. It was a different landscape than it is today, but you'd have to have money or insurance or something. I don't know the details of this, but I was delivered by a midwife in the front room of my mother's home.

SI: Wow.

MWH: Yes.

SI: Let us start by talking about your mother and her family background. She was also born in Americus, I understand.

MWH: Yes, my mother was born in Americus. Her mother was born in a smaller town, a bit away. She gave birth to me as a teenager. She and my father were married, I think, two or three months after I was born. The custom, which is breaking down, or has broken down, in those days, a man, as a matter of honor, would marry the young woman who was having a child, but they were very young. My father, I think, might have turned nineteen a month after I was born; my mother was eighteen.

The marriage only lasted three or four years. So, by the time I was three or four, they were divorced. He went into the military. Shortly, I think it must've been around the time I was born, he went into the U.S. Army right after the Second World War. He basically never came back to the town, except to visit. He never lived in that town after that. It opened the world to him, because he was living in that little town with no real opportunities, and so on. So, I speculate that this was a driving force for him. So, that's the story of my mother and father.

My mother and father both are high school graduates from the local high school. My mother was a very talented beautician. From throughout my childhood, I can remember her beautifying the hair of women who would come [to the house]. She was very popular as a beautician.

SI: Did she have an in-home business?

MWH: Yes, not licensed. The hair was done in the kitchen. Sometimes, people would be--there were no seats in the house--people came especially on weekends, because they prepared for Sunday, going to church. The way hair was done in those days, women liked to have their hair done the day before they were going to show it off. So, they would have the hair done and it would be very sort of new, but, on Sunday, they would comb it out and it would look more natural. So, Saturday was a huge day in her home.

Now, she also worked for a while in a formal beauty parlor, but she found she could earn more money if she did it this way, because she had overhead in that parlor. My mother was also a talented singer, so she sang in the church choir. She sang on stage, on Saturdays or other nights, as an entertainer in the secular world, and I remember [that] as a young child. Now, as I grew older, she didn't sing much outside the church, but I remember, as a kid, that she sang on stage.

There was a theater in the black business strip in my town. I don't know if you know much about the segregated South, but there were black entrepreneurs who owned businesses, but they were relegated to a certain section of the town. On the main black-relegated business strip, there was a theater, not owned by blacks, but it was catering to blacks. They had occasional stage shows there, and my mother would sing songs, popular songs.

Later, in her life, she actually worked at the Georgia Southwestern College. She worked in the cafeteria. She worked there until she was not able, but it was a steady and reliable source of income. [Editor's Note: Georgia Southwestern State College, established in 1906, is a public university located in Americus, Georgia.]

SI: Before we go further, could you just say your parents' names on the record for us?

MWH: My mother was Laura Turner Howard. My father was Moses William Howard.

SI: All right. Your mother grew up in the same town. Do you have any sense of the family background? Had they been there in the time of slavery, or had they relocated there?

MWH: Well, now, her father passed away before I was born. My grandmother--I'm thinking the town was maybe Unadilla, Georgia. I might have that town wrong, but my maternal grandmother came from that town. We'll get the name of the town.

I'm not sure of the situation. I think she may have come to Americus because she married Mr. Turner, Henry Turner, who died in--well, before I was born. Some other members of his family were rooted in Americus and they were Taylors. I think that might've been--was it her family or his family?--but the Taylors were relatives of ours on my mother's side of the family.

So, I can't say that, at least her mother's side of the family, didn't go that far back in Sumter County, which is where Americus is. On the other hand, my father's family had a longer period. They would go back to slavery.

In Lee County, Georgia, which is an adjacent county to Sumter, my father's mother was born in Lee County. I'm not entirely sure why they went to Sumter County, but they were there from, say, the 1890s or so. Sumter County is a neighboring county, so, people sort of moved across the line very easily, like, in New Jersey, you go from South Brunswick to Princeton.

SI: Sure.

MWH: I mean, it was that kind of movement. It was an agrarian area and people went to work on different farms. So, exactly how they got to Sumter, I'm not sure, but we can trace it back to the 1890s when they were there.

So, remember, Americus is the county seat of Sumter County, and these folk lived in the rural areas, out in the county, not in the town. Now, my grandmother, my father's mother, came to Americus, the county seat, at the urging of her children, because there was no black high school outside of Americus for her children. So, she helped her children go to Americus and live as boarders with a family that she knew, in order to go to high school.

So, after they finished high school, they wanted their mother to come to Americus. The son, of course, around that time, went into the Army and he provided his mother with a stipend. So, that made it possible for her to come and live. Her daughter, of course, stayed in Americus for, I'm going to say ten or more years, living there before she got married and moved away, but, by that time, her mother, my grandmother, had become well-established.

SI: You grew up knowing the Howard relatives as well.

MWH: I knew my grandmother's mother, my great grandmother, Zimmer Black, and I visited her as a young child in the town of Leslie, which is, I think, twelve miles from Americus. So, yes, I knew my paternal grandmother's brothers and sisters. She was one of thirteen children, and I met, I think, all of her brothers and sisters at one time or another. I was closer to some than to others, but I think I met them. I knew some of their children, so, they were my cousins; I guess--what?--second cousins or something like that. I knew them.

On my mother's side, I knew her sister and brother. I knew her brother's children very well. They lived in the town of Macon, Georgia, which is near; I think that's Bibb County in Georgia, not far from Americus. Her sister's children, I knew some of them, but I knew her sister and her sister's second husband very well. In fact, my mother's sister and her daughter attended our wedding here in New Jersey. They lived in Hartford, Connecticut.

In the South, Hartford became known as a place where you could go and harvest tobacco. Did you know Connecticut was known for tobacco?

SI: No.

MWH: It's not widely known, but, yes. So, the way migration happened--have you ever read Isabel Wilkerson's book?

SI: *The Warmth of Other Suns*. [Editor's Note: *The Warmth of Other Suns*, authored by Isabel Wilkerson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author, was published in 2010.]

MWH: Yes. The way that happens is, somebody hears from others, maybe in the barbershop or beauty parlor, "You can go to Hartford and get work," and the word passes. So, somehow, my aunt heard about Hartford. I don't know the story about this, but she got the courage to go and she went. She was there long before I was born, because I was quite mature--I would say pre-teen--before I met her, but she had been in Hartford for years.

My grandmother, my mother, they had gone to visit her. I'd never gone, but they had gone. So, that's how she went to Hartford and raised her family in Hartford, Connecticut, but that also was a choice that many African Americans in Americus made. That was an option they chose. Even some of my contemporaries went to Hartford, and some of them, of course, had gone to college, so they didn't pick tobacco. They were in professional categories.

Some of them, today, have retired and moved back to Americus, with pensions that allow them to live very well in that little town. They've built nice homes, and so on. So, that's the Hartford story, and I would say that we kept in touch. In fact, I'm still in touch with one of my cousins in Macon, female. We e-mail each other back and forth, we share pictures, so, yes.

SI: Growing up, to kind of paint a picture of your early days, did a lot of your activities center around family activities?

MWH: Yes, I would say extended family, because, on my paternal grandmother's side, her first cousin married into the Hollis Family. The Hollises had children everywhere you could find them, under the table and around. [laughter] They were my contemporaries, and they were my family.

I spent--remember, I'm an only child. My father married later in life and had a new family, and I'm still in touch with his second wife and at least two of the children from that marriage. Now, I was making a point and I went off on to that one. What was I talking about?

SI: The Hollises?

MWH: The Hollises. So, they were my friends. I would spend the night in their home, especially during the summer. We went swimming in the creek. Remember, there were no black swimming--well, there was one black swimming pool, but it was determined not to be very sanitary, and so some parents, didn't want their children to swim in this pool. Now, across town, there was a swimming pool reserved for whites, that was very, very attractive, with all the accoutrements of a great swimming pool, and so forth, but we swam in the creek.

The Hollises, the boys in the Hollis Family, we would go down to the creek and swim, naked, of course. There were girls in the Hollis Family. They were great sister types for me. I lived in a neighborhood where, up and down the street, families had lots of children and we played, but I was an only child.

Now, I lived--you asked me about family--so, I lived in my paternal grandmother's home, because my mother and her mother always worked. They were just working, trying to make ends meet, and so on. My paternal grandmother received stipends from her children. So, throughout my childhood, she never worked outside the home. So, her full attention was on "old Bill," you see, [laughter] and she was a very important part of my formation, I would say.

So, family, in the sense that, an extended family, I knew my relatives, but many of them were not close by. So, I think I've pretty much summed it up.

SI: Okay.

MWH: Yes.

SI: Can you tell me a little bit more about the neighborhood, what it was like? Was it like we think of in terms of a more suburban type of neighborhood? Just a description.

MWH: Oh, my friend, I think I know what you mean by that "suburban." [laughter]

SI: Yes.

MWH: Well, the first thing I'll tell you is, if you wandered into Americus, Georgia, in that time, and you didn't know where you were going, you would know that you're in a black community if the streets were not paved, okay. Any street that black people lived on in that part of the world--not just Americus, but in that part of the world--were left bare.

My street had a hill; at some point further along the street, it sort of leveled off, but there was a hill. Now, Georgia, you've heard of red clay in Georgia? Okay, it's real. So, when it rained, if you were coming down the hill in your car, there was a good likelihood that you could just slide off into the ditch. So, on a rainy day, one of our pastimes was sitting on the porch, watching people try to remove their cars from a ditch. On the other side of town, you had beautifully paved streets with sidewalks and lawns, and so forth, and so on.

My street was made up of homeowners and renters. Because of segregation, especially in the heyday of segregation--it began to change a little bit and a little class dynamic began to emerge--but, in the heyday of segregation, black people of different means and capacities were obliged to live in the same neighborhood, but you could tell a homeowner's place because it had flowers and fresh paint and maybe a little lawn. The renters were often living in not-so-up-to-par, not-so-freshly-painted [homes], bare yards.

One of the big things in my neighborhood, on Saturday morning, was to cut the grass, but most people didn't have grass. They had bare dirt front yards, but they would make something called a "brush broom," which was made from the sticks and straws from trees and bushes. They would sweep the front yard, sometimes in beautiful artistic patterns, and so on. The worst crime you could commit after they would do that would be to step on it and leave your tracks. What I'm conveying here was a sense of pride even in that modest place of the renter.

My grandmother rented her home, but, soon, early in my lifetime, the owner offered the people on that street who rented his houses the opportunity to buy. She took that option, so, she owned her home. By the way, the owner of that set of houses was the owner of a huge construction company in Americus. Charles Wheatley was his name, and Charles Wheatley hired black and white men to work in his construction company.

The word around town is, if you worked for Charles Wheatley, you made good money. Now, what good money meant, I can't say, but I can tell you that if a man made one dollar an hour, forty dollars a week, single women tried to catch him, see, [laughter] because he had a good job. Now, Charles Wheatley, therefore, was perceived as something of an enlightened man because it was thought that he paid more.

Because he was rich, he didn't suffer a lot of the pushback that whites who might've had the same attitude but not as much money might face. By the way, there were whites in the community who were not on the same page regarding racial discrimination, oppression, but they had so much personally at stake, many of them wouldn't take the risk to show their displeasure, although some did.

Wheatley's rent houses were all painted the same. You could ride by and they'd say, "Oh, yes, that's a Charles Wheatley house," see. So, when my grandmother bought her house, what is the first thing she did? She repainted it. [laughter] She wanted to distinguish that this is no longer a Charles Wheatley house. I don't know exactly--oh, that you asked me about the neighborhood, yes.

SI: Yes.

MWH: So, it was mixed. It was mixed. I'm trying to think of anything. Oh, yes, I'll say one more thing about that neighborhood. Segregation, racism, is an American disease. It exists in other places, but it has so thoroughly infected how we have evolved as a society, and, as a little kid in Americus, I could see the contradictions.

For example, I lived in a segregated neighborhood. I could step down from my front porch and walk a short distance to stand in front of a home occupied by whites in less than five minutes. Why? Because of the contradiction in the system. What happened? On the street where I lived, a family lived, say, three or four houses from me, going in a certain direction. Their next-door neighbor was a white family, but it was separated by a field where weeds allowed to grow up to show separation. Nobody trimmed the weeds, just let it grow up, and that was the line of demarcation. It was that ridiculous.

The other thing is that there were many white kids in our general area who were poor, who didn't have a good breakfast in the morning, who didn't have warm clothes in the winter, and it would get pretty cold there. Sometimes, we'd be walking to school. We'd pass their places of residence. They would be on the porch, poorly clothed, nose running, yelling racial names at us. We would say, "Look at them--what's the deal?"

So, I thought, early in my life, I mean, the question that was raised in my mind early is the prospect of alliances of people who were similarly situated economically. It was intriguing to me, how despite the commonality in terms of capacity in earning and quality of life, etcetera, somehow, race was the thing that really kept people apart--until Christmas.

When Christmas came, the local merchants created something that I didn't see at the time, but I've thought about it a lot. They created a kind of openness for the Christmas season, for commercial purposes. There was one radio station and Santa Claus came to read the letters from kids. As segregated as the town was, and I mean rigidly--the wealthier whites, of course, they lived in a well-defined separate area, quite distinct from poor whites or blacks--but that Santa Claus would read the letters from any kid.

He would be on the radio, "I got a letter here from [someone]," and you would recognize it as a kid that you knew from your school. Then, there were names when you assumed they were white kids, right. Then, Santa Claus would come through town on a certain Saturday. He would throw out candy from his flatbed truck, without discrimination. I never thought about it much then, but I've been thinking, this was because of the dramatic impact that black customers would have on the bottom line. If they were to boycott Christmas shopping, it would subvert the commercial retail business. See, we didn't know that, but that was why.

After Christmas, in the local newspaper--I was a high school quarterback--my team never appeared in the newspaper. The white high school team, Saturday morning after a Friday night game, they were front page, see. All of that is a part of the neighborhood.

SI: In interviewing other folks who grew up in segregated communities, it seems like children had less contact with whites, unless there was some circumstance, like if their family owned a business or something, or, sometimes, the family was consciously shielding them from interaction, but it sounds like you had a little more interaction.

MWH: No.

SI: Oh.

MWH: When I saw these kids on the porch that I described ...

SI: Okay, yes.

MWH: There was no real interaction. I mean, I never knew their names or anything. It is true that adults had more contact, because they worked for these people, see. My grandmother, my mother's mother, worked for a man as a maid. I'm not sure what he did, but he had a little money, because he lived in a high-rent district, so-to-speak.

He seemed to be pleasant toward her. He wasn't, like, mean or anything, but he called her by her first name, you see. She was a mature woman, but she was "Eva," see. I remember once--and, incidentally, public transportation was, in a small town like that, nothing like it would be in a city

like Atlanta or whatever. So, it was common practice that, if someone worked for you, you drove to pick them up.

It's ironic, because, let's say, if this guy, Ab Williams--I'm assuming his name was Albert, Ab Williams, they called him--he would come to pick my grandmother up in his Buick. I can see him now. She would get in the backseat and he would take her to his home and drop her off and go wherever he was going.

Think of that now--when you have your limo driver come to pick you up, you don't sit up front with him, right? You sit in the backseat, because that's a mark of distinction--think of that. It was meant to be a statement about segregation in Georgia, but, through the prism of what we have experienced here today, it was Ab was my grandmother's chauffeur, you see. [laughter]

I remember, in terms of keeping the kids [away], we had no real reason to interact with them, because there was a whole black world--schools, social outlets, sports. We didn't have any real reason, except if, for example, there was a neighborhood grocery store, owned, in my town, in my immediate neighborhood, owned by the Hancock Family. My grandmother often sent me to the store. The Hancocks were pleasant people. They never said anything untoward or anything, but this was all based on the conduct of black people. Do you understand?

If we were courteous and sort of modest and undemanding and [said], "Yes, sir," and so on, the system was working, but that changed. I remember Ab Williams, somehow, learning about my ability to create signs. I don't know, somehow, he heard about this, and I was something of an artist in those days. I would create signs. He said, "Eva, did your grandson do that?" She said, "Yes." He said, "I want him to make some signs for me." He owned property and he wanted to have posted signs on his property.

He asked me to create ten posted signs of plywood, sort of, to post around wherever. I don't know where the property was, but it was somewhere. I created these signs and, when they were done, I told my grandmother to let him know that the signs were ready and they would be such-and-such amount of money. [laughter] Now, I'm still in high school, right, and he went crazy. In other words, "Who is he to charge me?" I bought the plywood. I bought the paint. I painted them white, let them dry, and then, painted, "Posted," in coal black, so [that] it would be visible.

I remember the conversation with my Grandmother Eva. She was very proud of me. She thought that I was being fair. She thought that Ab Williams was, "How dare you?" right, but she was afraid to communicate that to him. I said to her, "Let me talk to him," and so, she was able to say, "Mr. Ab, I don't know what's gotten into that boy, but you need to talk to him. He did the signs. Don't put me in it," and so, that worked.

I said to him, I said, "Now, you're a businessman." I'm a teenager now, and I'm talking to this white man, you see. I said, "You're a businessman. I've invested money and materials. Do you like the sign?" "Yes." I said, "Now, I'm going to pass on to you the cost of the materials and money for labor." I said, "Now, if you want to have me break that down for you..." You know what he did? Whatever it was I was charging, he went in his pocket, he got the money together

and he slammed it on the table. In other words, he was not pleased. He was somewhat angry, but he couldn't refute what I was saying.

Now, in terms of intergenerational, I remember a few things like that. That was one. Another one is, sometimes toward the mid to late part of my high school, a wealthy white woman became acquainted with my paternal grandmother's ironing. I mean, she was an amazing person with things and curtains. This woman wanted my grandmother to iron some curtains, because, somehow, she'd heard through the grapevine that Minnie Howard could really [iron]. She was pristine in the way she did this.

The woman was known to be coming to the house with the curtains to deliver them. She came and she tooted her horn. So, my grandmother, who never believed in responding to tooting horns, she said, "Who is that?" I said, "I don't know." She said, "Well, go out and see who they are." I went out and the lady said, "Hi, I'm So-and-So and I brought Minnie the curtains that she's going to iron for me," and I said to the woman, "Well, bring them in. She's there. Come on in, bring them in." Of course, this woman was completely shocked, because I was coming to get them, you see, and take them in. What I noted with interest is, when she came back, she came and knocked on the front door to receive them.

Sometime later, when we began the voting registration campaigns and the direct-action campaigns, there were a number of intergenerational kinds of dialogues about the change that was coming, which I was always respectful of my elders. Somehow, they always encouraged me to be open with them, to talk with them. I mean, I talked to both of my grandmothers, I talked to my mother, as if I'm talking to you, and they respected that. Even when I was a little child, they wanted me to speak in whole sentences, no baby talk. I can remember even hearing, "No baby talk." So, we had some really interesting dialogues about the change.

Blacks in Sumter County outnumbered whites, so, the idea of voter registration, which we conceived, innocently, as simply a citizen's right, was read in a very different way by the people who controlled the political machinery. Today, I think, for example--well, I know--that the City Council of Americus is predominantly black. They knew that was a possibility, and they resisted and they worked through the people that they employed to put pressure on their children. The children's dialogue with their employed parents, I'm going to write about that. I'm doing some writing on that period, so, quite rich.

SI: Yes. Just to clarify, you are talking about the white employers forcing their African American employees to ...

MHW: Oh, yes, yes.

SI: Yes.

MHW: "Laura, isn't that your boy down there canvassing on Beale Street?" you see? Beale Street in our town was a very rough area, in the minds of some people, but, as young student activists, we canvassed the area to invite people to register to vote. Word got back that certain children whose families were amenable to economic pressure were involved in this, and they

would hear it. Sometimes, you would hear parents say, "Mr. So-and-So has been bugging me about you, but you keep on doing what you're doing." I mean, there was a lot of that.

I remember, in the whole area of intergenerational conversation around issues like this, when I was a senior in high school, already admitted to Morehouse College and making plans--this is the summer of the March on Washington, 1963--the pastor of our church came to our home. He wanted to have a meeting with my grandmother and myself. My grandmother was a very devoted church member. The pastor was a very nice man.

[Editor's Note: Morehouse College, founded in 1867, is a private, all-male, historically black college in Atlanta, Georgia. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom occurred in Washington, DC, on August 28, 1963. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a Morehouse alumnus, delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech at the march.]

He came, and the subject of the conversation was, really, he wanted to talk to me in her presence. He said, "Son, I want you to think about your grandmother. You're about to leave for Atlanta. She's going to be here all by herself, and all of this stuff you and your friends are up to, it's going to fall on her. Who knows what would be the result of that?" We both listened. My grandmother listened.

I was very attentive to how this would affect her, and she said to her pastor, Reverend J. L. Wilson, good man, "Reverend Wilson, I appreciate your concern, but I support what he's doing." That, I can give you many, many examples of how elders, who were really under existential threat from people who controlled their livelihood, but who committed acts of courage at some risk, but I think I may be getting a little bit off the subject.

SI: Yes, I definitely want to get into those issues heavily, but I want to also discuss more of what your early life was like, setting the stage for that. You talked about how there was a certain way of acting around white people in those early days. Do you remember it ever being consciously taught to you, or was it just something you learned by watching?

MWH: No, no. I hear, now that I'm in New Jersey, I hear about "the talk," all right--no. Segregation was such a profound, unavoidable reality in my town that it was "in the baby's milk." I mean, you didn't have to explain. It was all there.

The other thing was, it was such an old custom, by the time I was born, that there was a black society. That black society actually shielded children from the most blatant cruelties of the system. For example, to go into the early years, Americus was one of the earliest free public schools for blacks in Georgia, the McCoy Hill Elementary School for Colored Children.

My family--I was pretty quick on things--my family was big on education. They weren't especially educated in higher education or anything, but they knew education is just big. So, they pushed and convinced a woman who ran a kindergarten, black woman, very capable black woman--she ran a kindergarten in her home--they pressed that woman to let me in, Ms. Inez Dorsey was her name, to let me into that kindergarten at age three, like the Abbott pre-school, you see. [laughter]

[Editor's Note: In 1985, the New Jersey Supreme Court Case *Abbott v. Burke* found that certain districts in New Jersey, which become known as Abbott districts, were not providing proper public education. Under later cases in the *Abbott v. Burke* series, some of them received state-run pre-school programs.]

SI: Yes.

MWH: Now, what helped that is, I had some Hollises, my cousins, who were a year or two older than me, who were in that school. They did a little pressuring, "Let him in." So, I entered Ms. Dorsey's kindergarten at age three. So, in a couple years, I was, like, the longest-standing kindergarten student, because all the other kids went, like, at age five, one year before they went into first grade, but I was around from age three.

My aunt noticed that some of the kids of school teachers and undertakers and other somewhat middle-class black kids, they were going to school, she saw, they were going at age five. This is my father's sister, the one who remained in that town for ten years before she moved away. She went over to that school and she demanded, when I turned five, "Let him in. I know So-and-So's kid is there and you're going to let him in."

She was tough, but, as it turned out, these were kids who, because of when their birthdays came, they would turn six at a certain point. They still do that around here, and so she didn't know that. All she knew is, when they entered, they were five, right. She banged on the table, and so on. The principal says, "Okay. He can come the moment he turns six," right. I turned six.

Some of these kids turned six, like, in October, November, December--that's why they went in at age five, right. I turned six on March the 3rd and I entered first grade on March the 4th. Now, think of it--a school year, March 4th, you've got a couple months, you're out of there, right. I remember, after March, April, May, time to determine graduation, I mean, moving to the next grade. My first-grade teacher was the wife of the principal, Mr. Pace, Mrs. Pace.

Mrs. Pace--I could spell, I could read, I could do everything anybody in the first grade could, because I had been--what?--three years in kindergarten, right. So, I'm an ace; plus, I've got a couple cousins in there, rooting for me. I remember Mrs. Pace having a vote from the students in the class, "Should little Moses be allowed to go to second grade?" That's how I went to second grade.

I was always the youngest kid in the class, all the way through high school, because of that, by a few months, not by years, but a few months. That was my early sort of recollection of education.

SI: What did you think of the quality of the schools, both the teachers and also the actual facilities?

MWH: Facilities, horrible--clean, organized beautifully, but substandard because of the Board of Education's allocation to black education, textbooks, used, often badly damaged, sometimes not. That improved a little bit, but that was because of *Brown*, and I'll explain when we get into

that, but, yes, I mean, the buildings, clapboard buildings, but the teachers were outstanding. [Editor's Note: In *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the "separate but equal" precedent established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) and ruled that state-sponsored segregated schools were unconstitutional.]

The curriculum was hampered by the resources, but the teachers were devoted, they were loving, they were encouraging. I can name every teacher I ever had, and I learned later that some of them had done master's degrees at Teacher's College in New York, because Teacher's College at Columbia actually had a program. They were aware of the discrimination and the lack of opportunity, and they opened their graduate program.

You can find, across the South, many of these teachers did graduate degrees at Columbia. Most of them were undergraduates at predominantly black colleges, but they went to Columbia, and they brought that sophistication, that experience of New York--some of them had travelled widely--and they talked to us about that.

I remember the first memory I have of a library in school--it had almost no books on the shelves. I remember hearing, from a classmate of mine, long after we were adults, that he remembers that every book he wanted to check out had my name in it, because I just read everything I could get [my hands on]. The librarian would say, "It doesn't matter what you read. Just read."

So, that was the school experience. I think that all of us had that. All of us were endeared by our teachers, our professors, who would give us advice, not only give us good academic exposure, but give us advice on personal matters. Many of the homes that we came from, if we were thinking of being in "the big world," we didn't get a lot of guidance. We got a lot of love, a lot of good food, a lot of proper discipline, that we didn't think was so proper at the time, [laughter] but, if it were about how we tie a tie or how we dress or how we order in a restaurant, we got that from our teachers, with the support of our families.

Boy, oh, boy, if a teacher thought you were, as they say, "Boy, you have potential," they would pour everything into you. They would bring you books. They would take you on field trips, sometimes--well, I would say most of the time--from their own resources.

SI: Can you think of an example of where they would take you?

MWH: Well, let me think. I remember, once, going to a zoo. Now, there is the segregated South, but, when you talk about the big cities of the South, it's a little bit different. You're talking about a town with maybe fifteen thousand people, I don't know, something like that, but a small town. There were so many things that, maybe, if we read books, we heard about things, but we'd never seen it.

I remember, once, I went to visit a relative who lived in Atlanta. Everybody in the neighborhood knew I was going. So, when I came back, they all came to the house, "What was it like? What was it like?" When I was in Atlanta, young kid, this relative had a kid more or less my age, maybe a little older, to take me down to the Butler Street Y. That was the black Y in Atlanta, but it had an indoor swimming pool, right.

The Y was something we couldn't have imagined in our little town, but, in this black community--and this black community, by the way, is that side of town where Dr. King was reared, on the east side of Atlanta--I went in that pool, indoor pool. Then, one day, my relative took me downtown to Rich's Department Store, which is comparable to the old Macy's; we think of Macy's. [Editor's Note: Dr. King was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 15, 1929. Now a National Historic Site, King's childhood home is located at 501 Auburn Avenue, in the Sweet Auburn neighborhood, east of Downtown Atlanta.]

So, they [the neighborhood kids] said, "Man, what was it like? What was it like?" I said, "Oh," I said, "I went swimming in a swimming pool that was inside of a building, and I went to a store and went up on some stair steps that were moving," [laughter] escalators, right. They said, "Oh, man, we never knew you to lie so much," you see. [laughter] It was so huge and outside of their experience, they couldn't even imagine it.

In high school, I remember, a teacher took me and three or four other students--and I didn't think about it much then, but these were the students who were scoring well on her tests. She said, "Oh, these kids, they're on the ball," you see. She took us to the Atlanta Zoo, and I saw lions and elephants and whatever it is that's at the zoo. I saw this with my own eyes. Coming from a little town like mine, it's hard to imagine what that meant to see that and to be--really, I mean, then, I thought it was sort of normal, but I look back and I say, "What teacher would drive 135 miles to a zoo with some kids who are not her own, just to show them something?"

I had a teacher, once, who persuaded me--by the way, these kinds of things happened not just to me--but, in my case, this person got me involved in an oratorical contest. She drove me, sometimes sixty miles away, to some auditorium to give a speech in competition with kids from other schools, many times, big schools from big towns, as we would think of it, Savannah, Macon, Atlanta. These were all towns like, "Wow." These kids had better facilities, but she thought I could compete. I remember winning second place in a statewide oratorical contest. If they could've had their way, they would've given me a parade, because it was such a big thing.

The whole thing was, "Learn to annunciate properly, to project your voice, to stand and speak with authority." I never imagined that, one day, I would have to do that professionally, you see. So, that, I guess, would be an example of a teacher investing beyond and exposing [you to things], but there are other examples.

SI: When you would make some of these longer trips, did you usually go in somebody's car? Were there any difficulties involved in going?

MWH: No, no. In those days, the social contract was intact, you understand? So, there was no harassment driving in the car. That came later. Now, you had some of that earlier, and throughout black history, you've had some of that, but it is related to challenging the social contract, you understand?

I commend to you--I don't know if you know this name, Etta James, the blues singer--in her biography, which is written with a writer, "Etta James with," something, it has "Rage" in the title.

She, Etta James, is very light-skinned. Artists, in those days, travelled by car, and they would go in the South. [Editor's Note: Etta James (1938-2012), an American jazz singer, published her autobiography, written with David Ritz, *Rage to Survive: The Etta James Story*, in 1995.]

Once, the car was pulled over by the local police, or the highway patrol or whatever. Some black guy's driving the car and they put this flashlight [in the window]. They saw this woman laying in the backseat asleep, and they thought she was white. Of course, they became very agitated, and they [demanded], "Get out of this car." She woke up and she said, "What the 'F' are you doing?" They realized, by the way she spoke, that she was black.

She was a tough woman, I mean, Etta James, but, when you seem to be challenging the social contract--part of my family, not all, part of my family is light-skinned, right. My uncle, who married my father's sister, is a darker brown man. They would travel to Georgia and visit her mother. On occasion, they would take me back with them for a little vacation, right. I can recall my uncle being extremely cautious; oh, my.

SI: Do you want to take a break?

MWH: I need to, yes.

[TAPE PAUSED]

MWH: My uncle was very cautious, because he was afraid that he would be pulled over, because they would mistake his wife to be white and I was their child. But if you didn't appear to challenge any of the social norms, you could go back and forth as you please, for the most part, yes. Let me get this call.

SI: Sure.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: We were talking about travel in general, in reference to the idea of the social contract. I wanted to ask if there was what we might call over-policing today in the black neighborhood in Americus, or was that part of, "If you are not challenging things, they are not going to come through?"

MWH: Yes. What we see today, particularly in urban communities, in the North and South, especially in the urban South, I don't remember that as a big thing. Crime in the black community, as I remember it, other than, say, domestic disputes, that were almost entirely ignored in the black community--if a man was beating his wife, the neighbors often shamed them or told the guy to leave her--but what I remember is, the mention of black people in the local newspaper was almost always on Monday morning.

On the back page of the paper, there was a report on the people who were arrested for fighting, for drinking in public, things of that sort. It was called the "Recorder's Court," or something like that. My grandmother would read this, and she would often say, "Why don't they take their

liquor home and drink it? Why do they do that? Why do they go and become intoxicated and have conflicts in public?" That was her reaction to that.

There wasn't this constant riding through the black community, and so forth. I don't have that as a part of my recollection. Now, if you were arrested by--in my town, there were no black police officers--if you were arrested by the police, they could have their way with you. Now, if you were just drunk and a public nuisance, they'd put you in jail. They wouldn't necessarily beat you, but, if you were "uppity," you know that term?

SI: I have heard it, yes.

MWH: Uppity, see. Oh, then, you might be beat pretty severely, but I don't have a recollection of a lot of brutality by the police for just being black, yes.

SI: Before we talk about some of your later education in Americus, outside of school, what would you do for either recreation or entertainment? Would you have to work or help out around with your mother's business?

MWH: Well, after I was, like, in senior high school, I had a job, part-time job, but, growing up, I didn't. I just had the opportunity--I had chores around the house, cutting the lawn and trimming the hedges and things of that sort, lots of chores. My grandmother, who was a short lady, who was pretty tough, she required me to do certain things, but, usually, outside in the yard, things like that. Now, your question was about jobs.

SI: Jobs or recreation.

MWH: Recreation, you said.

SI: How would you fill your days, I suppose?

MWH: Oh, boy.

SI: Yes.

MWH: So, shooting marbles. That was a big thing when I was a little kid, and every kid in the neighborhood collected marbles. We would get together on some of these big yards that didn't have lawns and we would shoot marbles. We would build forts in the woods. We would go swimming in the creek, I mentioned to you.

We also would create toys. Now, we didn't have Toys "R" Us in those days, right. We would create toys. We would create bow and arrows with the bent tops of bottle caps; that would be the heads of the arrows. We would build targets. If you were lucky enough to acquire a BB gun or air rifle, I think we called it--what do they call it here?--but we called it a BB gun, shoot little ...

SI: Yes, BB gun or air rifle.

MWH: Yes, BB gun, and we would hunt birds and things like that, or shoot birds, not really hunt birds, shoot as targets. There were different social kinds of things we would get together. Later on, we became interested in girls, you see. So, I'm talking from the boys' point of view, but we were never bored.

For example, we would take wheels off of baby carriages and create buggies and we would race the buggies. I mean, we didn't know they were--what do they call them here?--some kind of a car, I forget. My kids were involved, derby ...

SI: Soapbox derby.

MWH: Soapbox derby; we knew nothing about that, but that's what it was, sort of a soapbox vehicle we would construct. We had a kid in our neighborhood who was very mechanically-inclined. I remember, he would go and find old lawnmower motors and attach them to bicycles. The bike would actually go like a motorized vehicle. Kids, older kids who knew things like that, were big at teaching younger kids how to do things.

So, you could leave home pretty early in the morning and go out playing and come back all dirty and tired from a full day. At a certain point, I owned a bike, and we also did a lot of roller-skating, because, a little bit away from the residential black community, there were streets with paved sidewalks on hilly terrains.

So, we would skate, and some of the kids would take the skates apart. I don't know if you know the skates that slide in the middle. They would take two-by-fours and create a right-angle type thing. They would make a right angle and put the skate wheels on the bottom and create a handle bar and have a little skate-scooter. So, we made creative toys.

There was a kind of plant in our neighborhood that had marrow in it. You could cut this branch, carve out the marrow, and you could take the handle of a broom and trim it down, so that the shaft could slide perfectly through this hole. There was a berry in our town called the chinaberry. What is the proper name? I don't know. This is what we called it. It was a green berry. You could take a berry and push it into the hole of that thing. Is this familiar to you?

SI: Yes.

MWH: You would push this in and it created a kind of air pocket. You push it all the way to near the end, then, you take another one. You take the shaft and you push it, and the air power would make the berry come out the other end. We would make these "pop guns," we called them, and they made an interesting sound. They didn't hurt anyone and we made those.

So, we were very creative, I would say. As children, we created toys. We played well together. There were always bullies around who wanted to have their way, and we had our way of dealing with them. We played softball--not softball, but rubber balls. We hit rubber balls with a broomstick, sometimes in open fields, not on the street. I don't recall growing up as a little kid, in my eight, nine, ten, eleven-year-old [world], like that, without something to do.

My grandmother's rule, which, by the way, was not the rule of many of my classmates, I mean, my schoolmates or friends, contemporaries, her rule was, you must be home by nightfall. One of my great displeasures, which I now appreciate, was that all of my friends could stay out and play under the streetlight and go in when they wanted to, but my grandmother said, [Revered Howard slaps the table for emphasis], "By nightfall." Of course, my friends would say, "Oh, man, you let that woman tell you?" [laughter] Hey, I didn't fall for that, because I knew I didn't want to arouse her consternation, so, yes. Is that response [enough]?

SI: Yes, absolutely. Tell me a little bit about your junior high school, and then, going to Sumter High School.

MWH: Well, the storied high school in Americus was Staley High School. That's the high school that my parents attended, and so on, but, by the time I got to--well, let me back up and say, this is something important--this run-down McCoy Hill Elementary School, I think it was built in the '20s. I have the records of this, but I think I'm right about that. A. S. Staley High School was the high school from that place, but it was a brick school. Staley was brick. It was relatively modern, and so on. I don't know how that happened, but it may have been when the two were built.

In sixth grade, I was in the class of Ms. Quincy Taylor, I believe her name was. We were told, at a certain point, to come nicely dressed to school the following day, because we were going to our new school. Remember, I entered school at six, five, six; that would've been '52. So, now, it's--what?--'58 or something, I don't know, something like that, but I'm in sixth grade, sixth grade.

We're at the school and we were all lined up and marched along the street to the Eastview Elementary School. Now, I had heard, I guess others had heard, there was a building being built somewhere there, but we didn't know what it was for; turned out to be a new school. We went to this place and, my lord, it was amazing. It had a dining facility. It had an auditorium with a stage. It had beautiful toilet facilities and the desks were smooth and new, and they were individual desks. My, it was amazing.

Of course, the teachers were so protective of this place, "Don't write on the desk, don't do [anything]," because it turns out that that school was built because of *Brown*. Nobody ever said that; I realized that later. This was an attempt to cover--or what do you say?--gloss over, the "separate but equal," you see, the whole thing. So, I'm in sixth grade; that's my last year in that new school. By the way, we learned later that it was built on a burial ground that had Union soldiers from the local Confederate prison. That's a whole other story.

SI: Wow.

MWH: But, that was a pleasant year in the new school. I was a big guy, because I was a senior, in effect. Then, I went off to A. S. Staley Junior High, because, at the same time that this elementary school was being built, a new high school, that was being built, was being built for the county. It's in the town, but the kids from the rural areas commuted in by bus. [Editor's Note: A. S. Staley High School opened in 1937. In 1957, it became a junior high school, and then, in 1984, a middle school.]

So, Staley, the storied, historic high school, which came out of something I haven't mentioned, became the junior high school. That was a wonderful experience, because seventh, eighth and ninth grades, inside Staley, brilliant teachers, demanding teachers. By ninth grade, they classified the students, "academically-inclined," and so forth. I was in this accelerated class, surrounded by curious, as it turns out, all college-bound people.

So, that was an interesting three years, but lots of exposure to music. I think I may have heard jazz for the first time. Well, no, I heard jazz a little bit before, but never in school, and never in my home until later; great science, science projects, great exposure to English. Incidentally, the one thing the black segregated high school taught was English. They were really eager. By English, I mean, like, grammar and sentence structure and writing, not as much exposure to literature on that side, but in terms of communicating, because they felt this was a ticket to a broader world, speaking the language.

I don't have any dramatic memories of Staley, except we had--I wish I had pictures of this--we had what passed as a gymnasium, which was not a gymnasium. It was a cement sort of surface, marked properly as a basketball court, outside, with a gate to enter, surrounded by not a fence, but a kind of tin metal shield, so that you couldn't look in unless you paid. You see, you had to pay to come through the gate. So, if you were outside, you couldn't look in. That was our gym, what amounted to a gym.

We never, right through high school, we never had a gymnasium. We never had a lighted football field. Across town, you had a stadium with bleachers, but let me let you [ask questions]. I've told you a little about the elementary transition.

SI: Yes.

MWH: And so forth, so, maybe you could press me a little more.

SI: Did you start playing sports for the school at Staley, or was that later on in high school?

MWH: Later on, yes.

SI: Okay.

MWH: I began to play sports in high school, in Sumter High School, yes.

SI: I also wanted to ask ...

MWH: I mean organized school sports. I played sports, yes.

SI: Yes, that is what I meant, yes.

MWH: Yes, right.

SI: Pick-up games and stuff like that.

MWH: Right.

SI: What was the role of religion and church life in your youth? Was your family active? It sounds like they were.

MWH: Yes. I was the sexton as a high school kid. I was the sexton in my church. An older man had held this position. I don't know if he retired from it or he died or something, but I became the sextant, which means that I dusted the pews and swept the floor and turned on the lights, and rang the bell for funerals, and so forth; active in Sunday school, active in church, but never thinking that I would be ordained as a clergy person. That was not my aspiration, but I was very active in church, participated in all the activities, special programs, that kind of thing.

SI: What church was it, for the record?

MWH: I attended the Mount Olive Baptist Church in Americus, the corner of Jefferson and Poplar Streets, and that was the church of my grandmother. My mother and her mother attended the Friendship Baptist Church on the other side of town. On occasion, I went to that church, but the church where I was baptized, where I really participated, was the Mount Olive Church.

Churches in that part of the world, at that time, often could ill-afford a full-time pastor. So, they met for worship every other Sunday, or I shouldn't say every other Sunday--either the first and third Sundays or the second and fourth Sundays--because the pastor would be the leader of another congregation someplace where he went the other two Sundays, to earn enough money to support his family. Our church was a second and fourth Sunday church.

We were a bit odd in that our service convened at two-thirty PM, not at eleven o'clock, as many churches did. So, we would have Sunday school at, like, ten on Sunday morning, go home and have a meal, come back to church at two-thirty. My friend, in Georgia, two-thirty in the afternoon in August is a foretaste of hell, because it is so hot, no air conditioning. Everybody had the little church fans, with the windows open, but, of course, it was the nature of the thing and it felt normal. It wasn't something we complained about, but I remember it to be hot and sweaty and much too long for a kid.

SI: In addition to the faith-based portion of the services, would they also have people come in and talk about different subjects?

MWH: Well, what you had, well, you had Sunday school, you had the regular worship service. You had some special programs, from time to time, in the church, and you had something called Vacation Bible School, which was in the summertime. Sunday school was often very interesting for me, but, in hindsight, we did not have a kind of structured catechism that some traditions have, whether it's the Roman Church or the Lutheran Church, I mean, churches with a set of doctrinal postures that are developed. We didn't have that.

We were not taught, for example, the Baptist Distinctives, which are the tenants of the Baptists, distinguishing you from the Methodists or the Presbyterians. We didn't have that. We just had a Bible study, and it was taught by good people who were not learned in Bible studies or anything. As I recall them, they were good, little introductions to church as community, not so much as a theological tradition, but as a community. It had that feel.

The church sponsored, like, a summer picnic. It had a revival meeting in the summertime. A guest preacher would come, and people would join the church and he would preach in the old style of, shall we say, convicted men without a lot of academic exposure to biblical languages or anything like that. Of course, this is also a social setting. The pretty girls were there, or, in your mind, they were pretty and, in their mind, you were handsome, you see. [laughter] You met your friends there, and that was the way church was, yes.

SI: You are obviously growing up during the time of the growing Civil Rights Movement. The bus boycott was happening over in Montgomery. Were these events discussed in your household or church? Would you follow the news in some way?

MWH: Well, follow the news, let me just say, my earliest Civil Rights event memory was Little Rock. Little Rock was big, and big particularly when the president of the country ordered troops to protect the black children. That really impressed me; impressed me as in it left an impression on me. That would be the proper way to put that.

[Editor's Note: In the Fall of 1957, the Little Rock Central High School was forced to desegregate by federal order. Carlotta Walls, Jefferson Thomas, Gloria Ray, Ernest Green, Elizabeth Eckford, Thelma Mothershed, Terrence Roberts, Minnijean Brown and Melba Pattillo, later known as the Little Rock Nine, were scheduled to enter, but Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus went against the order and called on the Arkansas National Guard to bar their entrance. President Dwight D. Eisenhower then federalized the National Guard and deployed the 101st Airborne Division to guard the Little Rock Nine as they entered the high school on September 25, 1957.]

The bus boycott in Montgomery, I can't say that--see, I get a little confused, because I've read so much about this, I know so much. I don't know exactly when it entered my childhood awareness. Let me think; it wasn't a big discussion in my home with my grandmother. [Editor's Note: On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to vacate her seat in the whites-only section of a bus. Local African-American leaders formed the Montgomery Improvement Association soon after to protest her arrest and chose Dr. King, then the pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, as their leader. They led a boycott of the bus system from December 5, 1955, to December 20, 1956, when the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Browder v. Gayle*, which struck down the segregationist laws involved as unconstitutional, took effect.]

It wasn't a big discussion, for sure, in the churches. Churches were more holding the community together. The churches were not vanguards in the movement. There were religious personalities who were--the most notable, of course, is Dr. King--but there were clergy and certain lay people

in churches, but churches as communities, as institutions, they were mostly about encouraging people, pastoral, you might say.

I think Little Rock, and the bombing of Koinonia Farm--you ever hear of that? Koinonia. Koinonia is eight miles from where I was sleeping, I think eight miles, not long, not very far. I can remember feeling the tremor of the bombing of the local feed store by Klansmen who objected to the feed store selling Koinonia animal feed. The feed store is in the center of the downtown area. It is one half block from the police station, across the street from two major banks, and windows from those places shattered, the bomb was so powerful. "Boom," in the early morning or the late night, something, I remember as a kid being shaken. [Editor's Note: Koinonia Farm, a Christian farming community, was founded in 1942 by Clarence and Florence Jordan and Martin and Mabel England. Due to the equality given to all members and workers on the farm, it was the target of many attacks by white supremacists. At one AM on Sunday, May 19, 1957, a dynamite bomb destroyed the Birdsey Four and Feed Store in Americus after the chain's owner disregarded a boycott against Koinonia.]

The attacks on Koinonia became, probably, the most prominent of the Civil Rights memories, Civil Rights-related memories, because on Koinonia, led by Clarence Jordan, blacks and whites were living together. They were living as equals together. They were farming together. It was a cooperative kind of thing. The local, or I shouldn't say *the* local, but people from the local area were shooting into the compound and all of that. We were reared on that.

I remember that, particularly, my tenth grade biology teacher--now, keep in mind, my tenth grade biology teacher was the wife of the local undertaker, means she was independent of financial pressure. Before I was in the tenth grade, she was my Cub Scout den mother. As I told you, we used to make bows and arrows. We'd take sticks and trim them down and put that little bottle cap on it, like an arrowhead, and we'd play. So, she said--now, this has to do with exposure--she said, "I'm going to take you to a place where you will experience archery." "Archery? What is archery?" We were mimicking the Native Americans. We never even knew there was something called archery, right.

She took us to Koinonia Farm, which we knew about as a dangerous place, but we went there and we met these people who were our neighbors--we never knew them--living in harmony. "Wow. You mean black and white people can live like [this]?" and they were calling each other by first name, all of them. Blacks calling whites, whites calling [blacks by their first name]--this is unheard of, right?

They had this really fancy archery range, with the big, multicolored target and real things. I remember, we used to shoot the bow by holding the (hand?) of the string with the finger like this, and they told you, "No, you hold it like this."

SI: Yes.

MWH: You see, and this was all foreign to us.

SI: Instead of using the thumb, using the two, middle and pointer fingers.

MWH: Yes.

SI: Yes.

MWH: And the bows were so big. We were fascinated by that, but Koinonia was, and it remained, right on through high school and after I left Americus, it was an important component to the movement. But we heard about Little Rock, yes.

SI: Was that a place where your family would say, "Don't go out there, avoid it?"

MWH: I don't remember that.

SI: Okay.

MWH: I'm sure that could've been the reaction of some adults, because the role of black adults was to be protectors. I mean, some parents would say to their kids, "Don't go near that march. Don't go near that sit-in." I didn't have that experience, but some did that.

So, I would imagine, though I can't give personal testimony to this, that there was some caution about Koinonia, but, if you were exposed to Koinonia, you wanted to go back, because it projected an image of human society that was just so foreign to us. In hindsight, it was helpful for me, and I'm sure for others, to have that glimpse of a different reality.

SI: I am also curious--did your family get any publications that were from the black press? Would you have another source of news?

MWH: My immediate family did not, but many, many black residents of my town subscribed to *The Pittsburgh Courier*. Do you know that one?

SI: Yes.

MWH: Now, they didn't subscribe to *The Pittsburgh Courier* for relevant black news, per se. They subscribed to *The Pittsburgh Courier* because it had a cartoon called *Sunny Boy* [Sam]. It was alleged that, with your magnifying glass, if you were astute enough, you could look at the *Sunny Boy* cartoon and see the number that was going to fall in the next week. Do you know what I mean by "the number?"

SI: Like a lottery?

MWH: It was the underground lottery. Before lotteries were made legal, they had a criminal underground lottery. You'd have people who sold the number and paid the money when the lottery number would be publicized, and, allegedly--it wasn't true--but that was the rumor. People who couldn't afford *The Courier*, but who played the number, they would come around, "Do you have a copy of *The Pittsburgh Courier* for this week?" you see. It was a weekly newspaper.

SI: Yes.

MWH: Many people subscribed to *Jet* and *Ebony Magazine*, but some of us didn't have the resources to do that, but we knew about these publications. *Jet*, of course, in those days, was regarded as a place where you saw, I guess you would say, gossip and, like, sensational articles. One of my memories as a kid was seeing a guy walking along the street holding the head of a woman in his hand. He had chopped off her head; I mean, crazy stuff like that.

Jet became less like that in later years, and, of course, as a teenager, I always liked the centerfold of *Jet*. It had an attractive woman, scantily clad, you see, [laughter] but you could learn things in *Jet*, and you still can, that aren't covered in the press generally, that's useful to know. Now, *Jet* has been impacted by the transformation in magazine publication, and so on. It does have an online [version], I think I have an app for *Jet* on my phone, but *Jet* was a popular magazine.

Now, my wife, who can trace her family back to free blacks in the eighteenth century, the mid-eighteenth century ...

SI: Wow.

MWH: Her family, black men, owned property in Virginia. Now, in her home, her grandparents subscribed to all of these publications, *Jet* and *Ebony* and *Pittsburgh Courier* and *The Afro-American*, which, I think, was published in Baltimore at that time, and maybe some others, but, in Georgia, it was a different experience.

SI: You were one of the first classes, I guess, to enter Sumter.

MWH: Yes, I think we may have been the second class. By the time I got there, I think one other class had been there, I think, as I recall it. It was a very new school when we got there, yes, and that would've been--I graduated in 1963, I was there three years--so, 1960-ish.

SI: Okay. Entering at that time, what got you interested in becoming active in the movement, but, then, also, what did you see at the dawn of the new decade? People talk about the Kennedy Era. I do not know if that had an impact.

MWH: Yes, it did, it did.

SI: What did you see for yourself in the future as you were getting into high school?

MWH: What we have not talked about is field work.

SI: Okay, yes.

MWH: My wife doesn't fully believe this, but I did pick cotton and I stacked peanuts, I cut cane, I gathered blackberries, I picked peaches in Georgia. I thought of mentioning this to you because the movement was sort of like that.

My wife says, "Well, I never heard your grandmother," because she knew my grandmother very well, "talk about how you worked and you had to go to work." I said, "No, no. If I didn't go to the cotton field when it was big cotton season, I would be, like, the only kid my age in the neighborhood all day, because that's where everybody went."

It was a big social thing. I mean, picking cotton, I don't mean to say it's fun, but most of us weren't picking cotton to put food on the table. We were earning extra money, you might say. When you went to pick cotton, you saw your friends. It was a social thing.

The movement was like that. Sam Weston, Sam Weston was a graduate of the Americus Institute. You remember I said that Staley was a storied high school? There was a pre-existing institution in Americus called the Americus Institute, founded by an association of churches. This institute taught Homer, the classics, physics. I mean, it was quite an amazing academic institution. [Editor's Note: The Americus Institute existed from 1897 to 1932. The A. S. Staley High School was built on its former site.]

I have the history of that school, which I think I'm going to try to give to someplace in Americus, to preserve it, but a young woman, with whom I'm still in touch, completed her degree here at Princeton. Her grandmother was an activist in Americus, but, now, lives in Virginia. Her granddaughter comes to Princeton and she finds me, and her thesis is all about this whole thing, about Americus and the movement. She heard I had a copy of this book. I had coffee with her in Princeton, and she sat there with her phone and made pictures of every page.

SI: Yes.

MWH: I was fascinated by [it], because I don't think of my phone as a vehicle for that kind of thing.

SI: Yes.

MWH: But, Americus Institute produced a cadre of citizens who, if they weren't from Americus, because people came from other towns to go to this special school--by the way, throughout the South, there were these academies that emerged, that were meant to produce these leaders of tomorrow, right. Do you know about that?

SI: A little bit, yes.

MWH: Yes, I mean, the Mather School, the Palmer School, and Americus Institute was sort of like that. So, Sam Weston graduated from Americus Institute. He was already a very senior man when I was a kid, but he was a tailor, because Americus Institute had a mixture of highly academic things and solid trades, business. He was a tailor.

Next door to his tailor shop was *the* hottest place for the kids to hang out. It was a sundae shop. His wife, Josephine, could make great banana splits and shakes and everything. It had booths you could sit in. It had a dance floor in the back and it had a jukebox with all the latest music,

right, and that's where everybody would go, to Sam Weston's, I guess we called it, yes. He was always next door in the tailor shop, working on things, and he had white clientele, because he was a really superb guy. People, even the department stores, would bring him things for alterations, and so forth, but he was a very sophisticated man, very sophisticated man.

One day, he invited a few of us to come to sit with him in the tailor shop. We were over at the other place there. We were lively, bright kids, athletes, kids who did well in school. Josephine knew us very well, and she had, no doubt, talked to him. He said, "Have you ever thought what it would mean if more of our people registered to vote?" This is a new thing.

My grandmother, by the way, was a voter, but she registered to vote outside the context of a movement. Again, this is going back to, "You're not going to break the mold. Okay, so, you're not a part of [movement], you're just an individual registering." So, she was registered, but he was talking about the political significance of registering. He said, "See if you can assemble a group of young people, and let's talk about this."

We formed an organization, at his inspiration, Sam Weston, called the Sumter County Voters League. He had a few adults, but mostly kids, high school. I was elected the youth leader of the Sumter County Voters League, and what was our job? Going door-to-door with a clipboard, talking to people about the importance of registering to vote.

In those days, the concept of citizenship was not fully formed in the minds of many, many black adults. So, we would get questions like, "What? You want me to register to vote? What am I going to vote for?" and you would say, "Well, there are regular elections, and you can pick from among the people who are candidates the ones you [like]." It was that fundamental. You would have to start at that level.

SI: These folks, it was not that they were not registering out of fear, it was more ...

MWH: Ignorance.

SI: Yes.

MWH: Not even feeling [like] a part of the system. They were alienated. It had never occurred to them. Now, there were always people for whom this was not an issue, but, [for] a large number of people, [it was]. Now, the movement is a dynamic, yin-yang, you might say. What began to build the movement was not just our initiative, but what? Can you think?

SI: Well ...

MWH: Resistance.

SI: Resistance, okay.

MWH: Resistance. In some ways, we were innocent, you understand? "Yes, every citizen should have a right to vote," we'd been reading in our civics class, and so on. That's the level at which we were operating, but, when the resistance came, "Whoa."

I can remember one of the scariest scenes of my young childhood. We were driven to Leslie, Georgia, twelve miles away. Our job was to canvass in Leslie. Now, in Americus, we were more segregated, definitively, than Leslie could be. It was too small, you see. You couldn't have a section here, a section [there], because the little town was just a section itself. So, [in towns like Americus], you could go to a black community and walk around all day and never be seen by any white authorities.

We arrived in Leslie, five, six, seven of us and, within minutes after we were dropped off, down in the little town, "Whoosh," police, [asking], "Who are you? Why are you here? I know about what you're up to, so, get on out of here." I remember, the next town was one mile away, De Soto, Georgia, and they were connected by one straight road.

The fear that we had was, once we walked over the city limits of Leslie, we'd have the better part of a mile walking before we would get to the next town, and the lines between vigilantes and true deputies of the sheriff were very blurred. So, we didn't think the chief of police would harm us, but he had people who knew his sentiments who would take care of it.

So, as we began to walk on that one-mile road, fearing that once we got about midway, we were going to have trouble, there was an elderly black woman sitting on her porch. She said, "Where do you think you're going? You're not going to make it down that road. Come on in here." She took all of these young African Americans, two of whom were from the North, one Philadelphia and one white guy, who I think was from Hartford. He was at Trinity College, anyway, in Hartford. Ralph Allen was his name, and John Churchfield was the Temple student from Philadelphia. She brought us into her home.

She's sitting on the front porch, rocking, and the police--no, a car, truck, whatever--came up. We could hear them, "Auntie, you've seen any kids, children," referencing us, "walking along here?" "No, sir, boss. I ain't seen nothing." Do you understand? The commitment of elders who were fearful of what could be done to them, the courage to do something like that, it was everywhere you turned, playing the role, not appearing menacing, but taking a relevant action.

So, the resistance, the response to voter registration, was really what gave energy and purpose to our early work. Remember, all of this was being done under the leadership of Sam Weston and the Sumter County Voters League. We had yet to make any real--going back before Leslie now, before Churchfield and Allen, because they were both SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] fieldworkers--there was this extended period where we were hearing about this great movement out there, but we knew nothing of them, and they knew nothing of us.

[Editor's Note: On February 1, 1960, four African American students staged a sit-in protest at a segregated lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, sparking a wave of sit-ins throughout the South. Following this, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) developed from a meeting of student activists held at Shaw University in April 1960 under the leadership of

Ella Baker, executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. SNCC became a large Civil Rights organization with both a paid staff of activists and thousands of student volunteers organizing and participating in such key events as the Freedom Rides, the Albany Movement in Georgia in 1961-1962, voter registration drives in southwest Georgia, Mississippi and other areas of the South, and the 1963 March on Washington.]

That really is the story of the movement, meaning, in isolated villages and towns and communities, people, as Dr. King would say, the zeitgeist was present and it was the sign of the times. We didn't know what they were doing. It was like the Great Migration. The time came, and there was no definitive leader, see. Then, as we began to grow and began to face public pressure and some arrests, people used to, began to, reach out to SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference] in particular. [Editor's Note: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was a Civil Rights organization founded in 1957 after the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Dr. King was one of its founders and president.]

SCLC sent some guy there, I remember him, Reverend Fred Bennett. He came and talked to us, but, eventually, Albany broke, the Albany Movement in Albany, Georgia, and that brought SNCC.

Dr. Anderson, I can't think of his first name [William G.], but Dr. Anderson, physician, invited Dr. King to Albany. The Albany Movement, again, had sprung up, right--no central headquarters or management, it sprung up out of the indigenous conditions in Albany. Dr. Anderson invited Martin King, SNCC came, 1961. Of course, in the five-county area, they were mostly predominantly black counties, you had the Southwest Georgia Movement. SNCC was assigned to get involved in this movement, and Americus was included.

[Editor's Note: The Albany Movement sought to desegregate the town of Albany, Georgia, between the fall of 1961 and the summer of 1962. Local African American activists formed the movement and elected Dr. William G. Anderson as their president. They joined their efforts with those of SNCC fieldworkers Charles Sherrod, Charles Jones and Cordell Reagon. Over a thousand African Americans were jailed during the campaign, including Dr. King in December of 1961. In 1962-1963, SNCC, along with local residents, engaged in voter registration efforts in southwest Georgia.]

That's when we met Prathia Hall and Charles Sherrod and other people who became well-known in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee. These were young people, some of them, like Don Harris was a Rutgers student. He came to Americus. Man, wow, I mean, you could touch them, because they were relatively the same age, right. They were telling us things that we had not even imagined, and they came from places where we never thought we would go.

SI: Could you give some examples of what they were telling you that was so inspiring?

MWH: Well, one thing they told me, that I didn't think much of, was that, "Look, are you going to college? What are you going to do going to college? You've got to win your freedom first." So, I didn't go for that too much, but they were very conscious of--I wouldn't say conscious--they had a sort of vision of a different dispensation, and they, whew, boy, did they take risks. I mean,

some of them were beaten really badly. I think Don may have been in the--I don't know, was Don in that case where they charged him with sedition or something like that? He was a part of it.

SI: Insurrection, maybe.

MWH: Insurrection, yes.

SI: Yes, it was a capital offense, I think.

MWH: Yes, he was in that, right?

SI: Yes. [Editor's Note: In August 1963, Donald S. Harris, Rutgers College Class of 1963, was arrested in Americus, Georgia, while trying to register African-American voters. Working for SNCC, Harris and two others were charged with insurrection, a capital offense in Georgia. The case stirred support on the Rutgers campus and across New Jersey in the fall of 1963. Harris was released in November after a federal court declared the law under which he was charged to be unconstitutional.]

MWH: Yes. Then, you had Willie Ricks. I mean, Willie Ricks, he was being beat every other day, but these were kids taking risks. I think what educated us more than anything was the response, the response.

The Martin Theater, there were two or three movie houses around town, but the Martin Theater was the longest surviving of the theaters. Black people were required to enter the theater through an alleyway and go up the back steps--and, by the way, it was built that way. I mean, when you go up the back steps, you had nice carpeting on the floor, and then, when you got to the top, you had a concession, right. Then, you go up two or three more steps and you're in the balcony. Down on the main floor was reserved for white people.

One day, somebody said, probably my good friend Sam Mahone, who was perennially jailed--I'm still close to him--said, "Why are we going all the way around there when we should be walking right off the street into the theater?" Then, that's when the movie house came under pressure. They began to arrest people for going into the front door. In some ways, the eagerness to go into the place would not have been so strong if the resistance hadn't been the way that it was. So, the movement began as an indigenous, kind of modest resistance to things. The resistance gave it more energy.

Eventually, it attracted national, regional attention and that was, [Reverend Howard claps his hands], it was full on. Then, it sort of went to things like grocery stores that didn't hire black people to work at the register. I mean, in those days, segregation worked this way. Black people could work in a grocery store, but they couldn't handle money.

I remember going to the grocery store with my grandmother one day, and a sixteen-year-old cashier called her Minnie. I said, "Hold on, what gives you the right to refer to this woman, who

could be your grandmother, by her first name?" and the kid almost melted into her skin. My grandmother said, "Honey, it's okay, it's okay." In other words, "Let's just get out of here."

I remember walking into a Piggly Wiggly; that was a chain. You know that one? Outside the Piggly Wiggly--now, this is, I'm off at Morehouse now and I'm a militant man, right. I mean, I've been to Atlanta, I've been exposed to King, I've been exposed to all of these tremendous human beings, Benjamin Mays, Lerone Bennett, you name it, and I'm back home.

[Editor's Note: Dr. Benjamin E. Mays (1894-1984), a Baptist minister, became one of the intellectual leaders of the New Negro and Civil Rights Movements through his tenure as Dean of the School of Religion at Howard University from 1934 to 1940 and as President of Morehouse College from 1940 to 1967. As an educator, he imparted his belief in the tactics of nonviolent civil disobedience to his students, including Dr. King, who became leaders in the Civil Rights Movement. He was noted for his "No Man is Ahead of His Time" eulogy for Dr. King, delivered on April 9, 1968. He later served as President of the Atlanta Board of Education from 1969 to 1978, leading the effort to desegregate the city's school system. Historian and journalist Lerone Bennett, Jr. (1928-2018) served as executive editor of *Ebony Magazine* and published books on African American History.]

We're walking and there was a big barrel with a screen on top, "Southland Academy." "What is that?" That's the high school the whites created when the courts demanded desegregation of the public school, high school, which is predominantly black today, by the way, inviting people as they pass to give a donation. My grandmother is about to deposit money. I said, "No, darling, we're not supporting that." She said, "What is that?" I said, "That's a segregated high school. We're not going to fund this type of thing."

So, that's in the category of the intergenerational, but the movement, as I say, in these small towns, in Dawson, Georgia, which is in Terrell County, in Baker County, Albany is in, I can't think of the name of the county now, but Albany, the county where Albany is [Dougherty County], there were five of these counties, Lee County is one of them, and that just exploded. Then, you had Charles Sherrod and Shirley Sherrod. They founded the New Communities Incorporated Farm to bring in black sharecroppers. It went like that.

[Editor's Note: After visiting Israel and studying cooperative land-use models there in 1968, Slater King, Leonard Smith, Lewis Black, Charles Sherrod, Robert Swann, Fay Bennett and Albert Turner returned to Lee County, Georgia to found New Communities Incorporated in 1969. Their initial tract of over 5,700 acres along Highway 19 formed the largest parcel of African American-owned land in the United States. The community initially intended to utilize grant funds from the federal Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), but this plan was vetoed by Georgia Governor Lester Maddox. After fighting for fifteen years, NCI lost this tract in 1985. By joining the *Pigford vs. Glickman* lawsuit in the 1990s, New Communities eventually received a settlement that allowed them to purchase the 1,600-acre Cypress Pond Plantation, a former slaveholder's plantation, where they built their Resora retreat.]

SI: You started out doing the voter registration under the Sumter County Voters League. How frequently would you do that? You mentioned people did not necessarily see the value at first. After it got going, would you say it was successful? Did you get a lot of people registered?

MWH: Yes. I can't talk numbers, because I don't remember.

SI: Sure.

MWH: But, at a certain point, it was abuzz. The kids were registering people. We were having mass meetings, by the way, which were both religious and social events. There were only a handful of churches that would allow these mass meetings to take place.

In my own church, Mount Olive, the chair of the deacon board appealed to the congregation to stop allowing mass meetings at our church, because the New York Life Insurance Company was our casualty insurer and they were threatening to withdraw our insurance. So, they could burn our church down and we would get no proceeds, right?

SI: Yes.

MWH: That was going on. Now, to a little kid down in Georgia hearing from Deacon Singleton that an insurance company called New York would actually withdraw our insurance, that broadened my sense of this race issue, which we thought was just in the South. I didn't get the business aspect of it, but, I guess naïvely, I was thinking, "Certainly, a business located in New York would not do this to us."

These mass meetings were lively, the freedom songs. I mean, I would say most of the really dangerous things that we did came out--well, they were dangerous because of the reaction, not because of anything we were doing--were the result of the inspiration that we received from mass meetings. They were powerful. They made you believe you could do impossible things, primarily through singing, not through oratory. We had some decent speakers, but it was mostly the singing and the sense of community.

I remember, once, we were having a mass meeting in a country church and, if you have a mass meeting at night in one of these churches, you step outside, you couldn't see your hand. I mean, it'd be that black, no road lights or anything. The church is surrounded by guys with these guns in the pickup trucks. Then, somebody would sing, and the church would be so, I don't know, empowered, and the people just left. They said, "These must be crazy people. Here we are, armed, but they keep singing," and that was really the story of how [we operated], long before we met famous people.

Now, later on, Dr. King was arrested in Americus. Other well-known Civil Rights activists, nationally, were arrested there, and, by the way, the jail cell where they were held has now been given to the local archivist to preserve. I would say, in the category of how the movement organically evolved, it was not planned--it was by word of mouth. We had no course in Alinsky organizing. I think that because we were young and naïve, and a little bit mischievous, the adults were inspired. You may have read the case of the girls who were arrested in the Leesburg

Stockade. Have you read that story? [Editor's Note: Saul Alinsky, a community organizer and author, developed methods of community organizing used by activists during the 1960s and 1970s.]

SI: Yes.

MWH: Now, these kids were a little younger than me. I mean, for a bunch of girls to, like, disappear, and, for weeks upon end, nobody knew where they were, boy, oh, boy. That also inspired certain influential white people in the local area, who were against some of the practices anyway, but they said, "My God, we're going to this extreme?" [Editor's Note: In July 1963, police arrested fifteen African American girls and young women who tried to desegregate the Martin Theater in Americus. They were imprisoned in the Leesburg Stockade under harsh conditions for forty-five days without any charges being filed.]

I'm trying to think of the attorney who I spent time with not very long ago, I think 2000--well, it was the fiftieth anniversary of the movement. I was back participating in a symposium, and he was there. He was the county lawyer, lawyer for the county. He was the President of the Board of Education. He was, at one point, the chair of the board of the segregated public library. He was chased out of town, lost his job. He became the lawyer for the Atlanta Board of Ed.

The dynamic was action and reaction. Every time their reaction became more and more brutal and unyielding, it elevated the pressure.

SI: Were there other times where you felt immediately, physically threatened?

MWH: Well, I remember being hauled into the police station once, one afternoon. A friend of mine and I were picked up and taken to what was, I guess, an interrogation room. I remember how relieved I felt that the whole premise of the arrest was they'd thought we were from another town. I'm not sure why that was so important, but they thought we were from another town.

When they discovered that we were not, they let us go, but, for a while, we were there and nobody else knew that we were there, we thought. We learned later that some people had seen this happen and had begun to report this around, but anything could've happened to us, see, anything. In those days, it's not clear what would've been the consequence.

SI: Was this a constant activity? Was it difficult to balance activism with, say, going to school or other aspects of your life?

MWH: Well, no, I think that comes later in my life. I think for the kids coming a year or two after me, it may have been an issue, because, remember now, in '63, in the fall, I'm going to Atlanta. So, I went away. In that summer, I went away to Illinois for a summer job, to earn money for school. Oh, sweetheart, thank you.

SI: Wow.

Barbara Howard: I'm coming back.

MWH: I'm going to break for a little bit.

SI: Thank you, wow. Let me pause for a second.

[TAPE PAUSED]

MWH: [In] '63, I'm in Illinois. I'm now working in a sheet metal works factory. Every night on TV, my hometown is on the tube.

SI: Sure.

MWH: Because that summer, things really broke out, around the Kwik Chek Supermarket. [Editor's Note: On July 31, 1965, protestors picketing the Kwik Chek Supermarket in Americus for its discriminatory hiring practices were beaten by a mob of local whites as local law enforcement stood by.]

SI: Wow.

MWH: And it was a really tough summer, if you go back and review the archives of that, the newspaper stuff, particularly from, let's say, *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, and this was all led by young people.

I told you the story of this young woman from Princeton University and her grandmother. She was a part of a group of three women who went to vote, and they stood in the white male voting line. Now, remember, they had the colored voting line, they had the white female voting line and the white male.

SI: Wow.

MWH: They went into the white male voting line, and they were dressed up, with high heels, everything. The white women were resentful, because, you see, the white women were accepting a role that was secondary, you see. Lo and behold, these black women were getting in a line they wished they could be in, you see.

Now, they went to jail. I don't know if they went on a hunger strike or something like this, and it gained national attention. The local police wanted to put them out of jail and they refused to leave the jail, oh, my. [laughter] So, this was the big thing.

So, in that sense, I went off to work, to go to college, and I missed that chapter, but I met it in Atlanta, because I'd say, maybe [of] a freshman class of 250, there were times when there were maybe fifty students, of my class, who weren't in jail, because, in that same year, although Atlanta had experienced some changes, it still had segregated buses, it had segregated pool rooms and all kinds of things like that. That era of the student in Atlanta, from all the colleges, black colleges, they were feeling pressure.

So, we met the movement there, and, of course, unlike Americus, this was an environment that was actively stoking and offering intellectual rationale for this, because you had Sam Williams, who was a philosophy professor. You had the political science guy [Robert Hughes Brisbane] who was there, great, great teacher, who has written quite a bit on black politics. Oh, man, I'll think of his name. But that was also the headquarters, national headquarters, of SNCC.

[Editor's Note: Samuel Woodrow Williams (1921-1970) served as Chair of the Morehouse Department of Philosophy and Religion from 1946 until his death in 1970. He also served as Pastor at the Friendship Baptist Church in Atlanta and helped found the SCLC. He co-founded the Atlanta Summit Leadership Council, which organized protest campaigns targeting segregated spaces and services in Atlanta in the 1960s. After earning a Ph.D. in political science at Harvard, Robert Hughes Brisbane (1913-1998) came to Morehouse in 1949 as a professor, founded the Political Science Department, and chaired the department for twenty years. He authored *The Black Vanguard: Origins of the Negro Social Revolution, 1900-1960* (Judson, 1970) and *Black Activism: Racial Revolution in the United States, 1954-1970* (Judson, 1974).]

Morehouse alumni, like Julian Bond, who actually left Morehouse to be in the movement and came back years later to complete his degree, all of these people were around in the city. In my case, having been in Americus, there were SNCC volunteers coming back to Atlanta for meetings who knew me, and they remembered me from that place. [Editor's Note: Julian Bond (1940-2015) helped found both SNCC and the Southern Poverty Law Center. He served in the Georgia House of Representatives (1967-1974) and the Georgia Senate (1975-1987) and then held the post of Chairman of the NAACP (1998-2010).]

So, that's when the Americus chapter closed for me, because I never lived in Americus after that, although I went back quite a bit to visit relatives. In the years, say the last thirty years, I've gone back and forth as a guest of the college, guest of the community. It's not my home anymore, but, indeed, by '63, I was transitioning, not by intent, but by circumstances, to a different place.

SI: All right.

MWH: Go ahead.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SI: Okay, we are back on.

MWH: Yes, Georgia Southwestern College, it's been a real asset to the town, I think. Over the years, it's sort of evolved into a different place, because, when I was there, it was a two-year college, whites only. Now, I think it might have some graduate school offerings, and there's a couple people in the History Department there that have a real interest in the history of the area. So, in the kinds of things that people have tried to do to keep the historic memory of the movement alive, they've been very good.

I was involved in an effort to persuade them to house the archives, but something happened and that fell through. So, I don't know where they are with that right now, but there's always a

danger, which is intersecting with your work, of losing that stuff. I went down there once, because I'm sort of a "favorite son," and I upset people because I told them they couldn't possibly do what they were trying to do as a free-standing organization.

They were a little--I don't even know if they were incorporated--but they were trying to preserve all these papers and pictures and stuff. I said, "No, you've got to have a university do this, because they have facilities for this. Nobody's going to come to you to do research." There were people there who got it right away and they took it over and started pushing for it, but, for a minute, I was being accused of bringing ideas from up North. [laughter]

SI: Yes. It sounds like the outside forces, like SNCC, which I would assume included a lot of folks from the North and more urban areas out West, it sounds like they were fairly well accepted by the local activists. Was there any tension?

MWH: In the black community, I think they were quite well accepted, without respect to race. See, the thing about black people in the South, despite how mean some white people were--and not all of them were. Let me just say, like I said, if you didn't appear to be challenging the status quo, you didn't see the mean side, you see, but, when you were, if you were thought to have in your mind that you were a fellow American, you were an equal, then someone who was relatively kind to you could change personalities pretty quick. I lost track of the point I was making, except I wanted to say that part.

SI: Just if there was any tension between, let us say, the outside activists and local activists.

MWH: Well, what I was going to say is that despite this kind of racial apartheid thing, black people never developed a culture of hatred toward the white people. I remember, as a kid, some woman who worked in a white home, maybe as a domestic worker, died from our church. She had worked for this family for a long time, and the family wanted to come to the funeral, right. So, our church reserved front pews for them to come and sit. I was a mid-teen at that time, but very perceptive of these things, and I could sense that the whites thought we were putting them on the front row because they were white. Do you understand?

SI: Yes.

MWH: But, we were putting them on the front row because of their relationship with the deceased. So, when people like Ralph Allen [arrived], one of the white people who were there, but there were several who came and were very active in Americus, they were received like family. I mean, Ralph has slept on the floor in our house, eaten food, come to my grandmother's home for meals. That's the way the SNCC workers were treated.

Now, you had, I guess--I didn't know them, that I wasn't conscious of this--but I'm sure that some families felt these kids were too controversial, but I didn't see much of that. The thing about the SNCC people is, they had to rely on the community totally. The monthly income, when they could get it, of a SNCC fieldworker was fifty bucks a month. So, they were always eating in somebody's house or sleeping on somebody's floor. People didn't have enough beds to accommodate them. Where else did they stay? There were no hotels.

There came a time, not in the beginning, but there came a time when, I think, some of them were accommodated at Koinonia, but that wasn't true right away. The corridor, Highway 19, between Americus and Albany was a hot trail, my friend, because vigilantes and state police, they knew people were moving back and forth. If you travelled that road at night, you did a lot of this stuff.

SI: Yes, head on a swivel. Why did you choose Morehouse?

MWH: [laughter] Oh, my God, I shudder to think about this, but it's true--it's the only college I applied to attend, the only college. So, part of it was arrogance, right. [laughter] I thought they were sitting there in Atlanta waiting for me to arrive, you see, but Morehouse had, and I think to some extent still has, a reputation, but, in those days, it was unrealistic, their reputation. Who was there? Who had been there, you see? It was Martin's *alma mater*. It was where Howard Thurman had studied. That name mean anything to you, Howard Thurman?

[Editor's Note: Dr. King graduated from Morehouse with a BA in sociology in 1948. Reverend Howard Thurman (1899-1981) served as the first Dean of Rankin Chapel and on the faculty of the School of Divinity at Howard University (1932-1944) and, later, Dean of Marsh Chapel and on the faculty of the School of Theology at Boston University (1953-1965). His book *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949) and his work with the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco, along with his academic career, helped spread a philosophy of nonviolent resistance.]

SI: I am not that familiar.

MWH: Oh, man, giant, giant of a guy. Dr. Mays was there. It was the crucible. I once told an audience that Morehouse was so compelling for a young black man who was going to make a difference, [that] if I had received a full scholarship to Oxford, the people would be gossiping, "Poor fellow, he's going to Oxford because he couldn't get into Morehouse." [laughter] That's really the image that it had. So, because I wanted to go there, I applied. Whew, they did let me in, but that was a big risk, because, today, you know how it goes, your kids apply to ten schools and they sit around and [think], "Oh, my lord."

So, I went to Morehouse, had no money. They gave me some scholarship help, but I had this wonderful aunt in Illinois who took me into her place. I got a job in the local sheet metal works factory, where I worked every summer until I graduated. Then, of course, at Morehouse, I had jobs. I had a job, and I was a psychology major, so, I was an intern at a local mental health research institute. In the Christmas holidays, I was a porter on the Northern Pacific Railroad. So, I flew to St. Paul-Minneapolis, where I got my health checkup, and I went on the road, down to Chicago, back up through the Twin Cities, out to Seattle and back. That's the way I managed to graduate without debt.

SI: Wow.

MWH: But, Morehouse College, I mean, boy, did it open my eyes to so many, many things--humanities, foreign languages, world history, meeting other black people who were smarter than me. Down in that little town, it was probably eight or ten of us who were considered really

academically prepared. We were led by girls, by the way; three or four girls were considered really outstanding.

I think one of them went to Tuskegee. I'm not sure where they all went, but they went off to college. One went to Morris Brown College, which, unfortunately, has fallen on hard times by now, but Barbara Jean Watson and Ruth Whitehead and Lavonia Snead, these were really [Reverend Howard snaps his fingers]. In another world, they were Phi Beta Kappa people. Then, you had several boys who did well and went off to college. I think out of a class of sixty-seven students, we were sixty-seven ... [Editor's Note: Morris Brown College, a historically black college in Atlanta, has been unaccredited since 2002 because of a school administration embezzlement scandal.]

SI: At Sumter.

MWH: I think maybe forty-five of us finished college.

SI: Wow.

MWH: That's something, isn't it? But I was the only one to go to Morehouse. I'm the first graduate of Morehouse from that town, in 1968, since the early '50s. Since that time, there've been more, but it was the place to go.

It was a big challenge, because, in Americus, those of us who were considered smart were--our curriculum was substandard, especially in math, in science, in languages. So, when you got to Morehouse, you had people who spoke foreign languages, who had taken advanced courses in physics and all such as that. So, you were a big fish in a little pond; now, you were a little fish in a big pond.

I just learned so many things about black culture. My repertoire and exposure to jazz began to really dramatically increase. I had a little exposure in high school, but I didn't have peers who were interested in the music, so I often listened to music alone. When I listened with friends, they were just tolerating it because they were my friends. [laughter] I got to Morehouse and not only--now, remember, in that little town, we had no instrumental music--I got to Morehouse and there were classmates who were playing in jazz orchestras.

Then, you discover what you bring to the table. That was a good thing, too, but, no, I never thought seriously about another college, yes.

SI: Do any professors stand out in your memory as particularly influential?

MWH: Oh, yes. I had good teachers at Morehouse, but I think, I would say--the political science guy I was trying to think of was [Robert Hughes] Brisbane, Harvard Ph.D., extraordinary mind politically--I would say Lucius Tobin. Lucius Tobin was an ordained minister, was ordained, but he was, in addition to that, he was a very--he consumed books. He read about everything, and he taught me only one course, and I don't even remember the course, but he

formed a reading group and we met in the--what is the campus Episcopal house? It was called Canterbury.

[Editor's Note: Reverend Lucius M. Tobin (1898-1984) came to Morehouse as a Philosophy and Religion Department faculty member in 1944 and also served as Pastor of the Providence Baptist Church in Atlanta.]

SI: Canterbury.

MWH: The Canterbury House, and we would read [Jean-Paul] Sartre, we would read Nathanael West and [W. E. B.] DuBois. I mean, we had a reading group and it was not a part of our curriculum, but I remember that extracurricular kind of exercise more than even the class he taught me. I remained in touch with him until the latter days of his life, long after. In fact, he came to Princeton Seminary once to visit me. He was in New York and he came out.

Samuel Williams was very influential. He was the Chair of the Department of Philosophy, and my minor area of study was philosophy. He had been the teacher and close confidant of Dr. King's.

Willis Laurence James probably influenced my musical interests. He was actually a member of the faculty at Spelman College, but he taught a course in music appreciation. [Editor's Note: Willis Laurence James (1900-1966), a violinist and educator, taught at Spelman College from 1933 to 1966.] Now, I don't think it's true much anymore, but, in those days, Morehouse's predominant student body came from small towns, like my little town, bright guys from little towns. So, things like music appreciation, exposing them to European classical music, jazz--look, in my town, you heard country music, blues and religious music. I won't even call it gospel; maybe it was beginning to be gospel in those days. So, "Baroque music, what is that?" You'd never seen anyone play a violin. You may have heard it somewhere.

Willis Laurence James, Ph.D. in music, friends, personal friends, with people like [African American tenor and composer] Roland Hayes--I don't know what that name means to you, but he was a revered tenor, world-renowned--these were his friends. He would say, "Come and talk to my music appreciation class, guys." I remember, he had a very fancy, sort of sophisticated turntable that would be placed in the class, and he would put on LPs and play them. You would hear opera and he would explain what was going on in the opera and the history of opera, "Wow." The mayor of my town probably never heard of opera. [laughter]

SI: Yes.

MWH: But, one day, he put on a song that was gripping for me. [Editor's Note: Reverend Howard sings a melody.] It was Miles Davis playing *Sketches of Spain*--no, no, *Concierto de Aranjuez* from the album *Sketches of Spain*. I had just a few dollars. I think, back in those days, albums cost three dollars or something. I rushed out to the store.

I could tell you, that's the first album that I ever wore the treads out. You played it so much that the needle would slide, it wouldn't even go into the grooves, *Sketches of Spain* [(1960)], because I had a couple of [saxophonist John] Coltrane records before, [jazz singer] Dakota Staton was my

favorite vocalist, but I had never heard jazz played with an orchestra. That opened my eyes to something there.

So, all of that was, like, Morehouse offered a gateway into a kind of cosmopolitan world. You had professors from different countries. In those days, Morehouse had quite a few African students. So, I was able to sit and listen and talk to African students, learning about Zimbabwe and the colonial situation there. So, it sort of travelled from there.

SI: You said your major was psychology. What led you to psychology? What developed your interest there?

MWH: Of course, there was no such thing as psychology in my little town; I mean, psychology, no study of psychology. I thought I was a mathematical genius. I had made one hundred, perfect scores, in geometry and trigonometry, and so, I was "the blooming young Einstein." I got to Morehouse and realized that three-quarters of my advanced algebra class had had calculus in high school. So, right away, I knew that I might be able to balance my checkbook, but I was no math genius. [laughter]

I am still convicted by this--my interests are so broad and I have to really concentrate on zeroing in on and prioritizing interests. I'm reading *The Brothers Karamozov* [an 1879 Russian novel by Fyodor Dostoevsky] now. Who else is reading that, [laughter] some Russian in a back village someplace? My interests are very broad.

I discovered, among my interests, I think because of my teacher, that, really, I was taken by psychology, and my aspiration, at a certain point at Morehouse, was to be a clinical psychologist. I was an intern at the Georgia Mental Health Institute and, in therapy, they used to teach the importance of forming a relationship with a client, to win the confidence, the trust. This was a rather drawn-out, time-consuming process. People would always talk to you. They would tell you things, but they would be superficial. Only when they really had that bond would they open [up to you].

There was a chaplain there by the name of Chaplain Close, and I watched Chaplain Close. We would have a new intake person, a new patient. Chaplain Close would show up and the person would spill their guts in five minutes. The chaplains somehow--in those days, I'm not sure that's true anymore--inspired confidence, and people would talk to them and tell them, really, *stuff*. I said, "Wait a minute, maybe this is something that I need to think about," because church was very much a part of my life.

So, I entered Princeton Seminary, because Princeton Seminary, in that time, had one of the most respected programs in pastoral care and counseling. Seward Hiltner, revered person in this field, written textbooks and all that type of thing, [was there]. So, that was an interest that I had. [Editor's Note: Seward Hiltner, a Presbyterian minister, served on the Princeton Theological Seminary faculty from 1961 to 1980.]

Then, I discovered that this field was so racially weighted, the approach to therapy, the ingredients of therapy. It was very much a Eurocentric kind of framework. So, that sort of

drifted out of my mind and I became [interested in]--again, so many interests--I took an interest in the history of religions, and that was my focus at Princeton.

Another disillusioning experience I had there was, I discovered--I had excellent teachers--but I discovered that a field like the history of religion--my advisor at Princeton was Edward Jurji, a Lebanese Christian from a Muslim family, Princeton University Ph.D., but Dr. Jurji was always comparing or contrasting Christianity with other religions, almost implying an effort to show how Christianity was superior. I was interested in religion, the phenomenology of religion. You see what I'm saying, you see that kind of [distinction]? [Editor's Note: Dr. Edward Jurji (1907-1990) served on the Princeton Theological Seminary faculty from 1939 to 1977.]

SI: Yes.

MWH: Yes. I wasn't interested in proving that my religion was better than another guy's. I mostly wanted to know what was his thing or her thing. At Princeton Seminary, you have some kind of exit process. I don't know what it's called, but I remember having to write something about my career aspirations, and I remember it as if it were today. I wrote on my thing that I aspired to arrange things.

I was very good at organizing things and giving focus to things and seeing things through. I didn't know that was administration, but that's been the hallmark of much of my life. I mean, I've done a lot of other things, but my really strong suit is in conceptualizing and taking an idea and advancing it.

SI: Let me step back to Morehouse. Did you continue your activism while on campus?

MWH: I did. Now, I only was arrested at Morehouse once, because I had a *very* tenuous financial predicament. I was always struggling to pay for the next semester. So, I became active on campus, for example, in the student newspaper, things like that, leading class, like, I was the treasurer of the senior class and stuff like that.

What was really pressing in my freshman year, in terms of opening accommodations in Atlanta, that wall fell really fast. So, by the time I entered my second or third semester, the overt legal segregation in Atlanta had all but passed. I'm sure there was still--what do you say?--*de facto* segregation, residential segregation, and so on. There was not a lot of campus activity into the town after that, but, for example, one of my roommates was from Selma, and Selma broke big long before '65. Almost daily, we would receive reports from Selma.

[Editor's Note: Through the late 1950s and early 1960s, African Americans (and their allies) in Dallas County, Alabama, and its county seat, Selma, Alabama, fought the state government, the White Citizens' Council and the Ku Klux Klan in their efforts to register African American voters. In 1963, SNCC organizers joined the effort. After the bombing in Birmingham, SNCC and local activists staged sit-ins and other protests that met with violent opposition. The civil rights activities continued with the historic Selma-to-Montgomery March in the Spring of 1965 and voter registration efforts in counties such as Lowndes in the summer of 1965.]

On the campus, of course, we had many visitors from the frontline of the movement, but my goal, after a certain point, was to maintain my scholarship, by which I mean my financial scholarship, which meant I had to maintain my scholarship. That really was the hallmark of my time for the duration, I would say.

At Morehouse, a lot of people came from the same background. So, if you sat in the dining hall, you'd be engaged in conversations about what's happening in Selma, what's happening in this place, what's happening in that place. Dr. King would give a talk; you'd go hear that. Sometimes, student leaders would disappear for a semester or so, and you'd learn that they had gone to wherever they were from, but that wasn't a big trend. So, that's about what I would say. From the social activism side of Morehouse, that's about what I would say.

SI: You mentioned, earlier, the summer of the March on Washington. Did you wind up going to Washington?

MWH: You mean in '63?

SI: Yes.

MWH: Man, Washington was like going to New Delhi or someplace.

SI: Okay.

MWH: I mean, it was so far, really. I mean, I could not imagine myself in Washington, DC. That's how far it was, culturally, from where I was. Going to Atlanta was a huge step for me, not because I was afraid of going. I had been to Chicago, but, as a kid, really, as a kid, Washington was something we paid very close attention to, but it was not something we imagined.

We didn't have the resources to get on a train, or we didn't have--my cousin, who was, like, a year or two older than me, was hired by my mother to drive me to Atlanta in a Corvair. Have you ever heard of that? You ever seen one?

SI: Yes. Does it have the fins on the back?

MWH: Well, no, it has the motor in the back.

SI: Okay, yes.

MWH: And, God bless the Corvair--it must've broken down two or three times on our way to Atlanta. [laughter] He was delighted to drive me, because he was getting exposed to something.

When I arrived on the campus, pulling on to the campus, there was a guy on one of the top floors of the dormitory, nearby the entrance, yelling down. This is a black guy yelling down at another black guy in what I gleaned to be French, fluent French. He was yelling back in French. My cousin said, "Man, did you hear that? What is that they're speaking?" [laughter] Well, I sort of

had a sense of, I said, "I think that's French." Neither one of us knew what they were saying. It began just like that, opening doors, meeting people of different class orientations.

There were students in my class whose grandfathers had finished Morehouse, you see. Their fathers finished Morehouse. I didn't have that lineage. Then, watching my [classmates] in math, or some other subject, sitting out on the college campus, on the bench relaxing, reading a novel, I'm in the library killing myself, studying Epsilon-Delta proofs and all of this stuff. Then, they make an "A" on the test and I make a "B-minus."

I got up enough nerve--I knew this guy very well--Calvin Jeffries, I believe his name was, from Virginia. We called him "Sea-lee". I asked him how is it he could sit around and read fiction on a spring day and I'm in the library killing myself and you make an 'A-plus'?" He said, "Oh, Howard, man, don't worry." He said, "You're doing great. I had that in high school," you see. So, for me, college was more that kind of experience, of being exposed not only to subjects and experiences, but people, people who were black, people who were victims of a certain kind of racial disadvantage, but who were still, nonetheless, more advantaged than myself.

Look, my wife read books in the eighth, ninth, tenth grade in Princeton High School that was on my college entry reading list. J. D. Salinger and all of that stuff, she was reading that in high school. I mean, so, the list that comes for me to read to go into college, she's read. I mean, I didn't know her then, but I learned these things from her. So, that was a revelation, that despite the love and the instruction and all of that stuff that I received from great teachers in my town, the weight of poverty and discrimination was so heavy that the valedictorian, in a different setting, was a "C" student, see.

Toward the end of my stay, I would say as I was entering, or midway, my junior year, I had a teacher from Randolph-Macon College. You ever heard of that? [It is] down in Virginia, someplace like that. I'm looking at her face and I'm going to recall her name at some point, but she was a white woman, not married, devoted to teaching at a black college, and she was brilliant.

I remember how she took an interest in my writing. She saw that my writing was so stiff--grammatically correct but stiff--and she said to me, one day, "I need to see you." She invited me into her office. She said, "I want you to be a better writer, but you're going to have to learn to write a bit more the way you speak," and that was the beginning of the journey of writing. Then, I began to enjoy it. She was a very influential person--Hume, Jeanette Hume, H-U-M-E, Randolph-Macon College. [Editor's Note: Dr. Jeannette Hume Lutton (1930-2006) taught English at Morehouse from 1962 to 1996. She graduated from Randolph-Macon College in 1952 with an AB degree and earned her MA and PhD at Yale. She taught briefly at Randolph-Macon in 1954.]

For a while, my musical taste was confined to bebop and Baroque. I listen to all kinds of music now, but, if I want to sort of revert to default, those are the two musical categories I tend to pick, yes. Many people expect me to say gospel music or something. [laughter] I love some, I don't--I'm not a big contemporary gospel music guy, but I like Thomas Dorsey and others, but he's the

father, really, the father of gospel music. Do you know that name? There's the jazz band leader Tommy Dorsey.

SI: No, I am not familiar with this other Dorsey.

MWH: But Thomas Dorsey is a different man. He's a founder of gospel music, and he played jazz before. When his wife died, he wrote *Precious Lord*. You know that song? "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on." He created this genre of religious music, but it was rejected because religious leaders knew he had played "the devil's music" over here, see. But my preference--I gained substantial spiritual substance from the two musics, forms, that I had just mentioned. [Editor's Note: Thomas Andrew Dorsey (1899-1993) recorded *Take My Hand, Precious Lord* in 1937.]

While I was at Bethany, with the help of a lot of gifted people who were well connected to the music, we created a jazz vespers, which is still going. My successor has kept it going. So, that's about twenty years. [Editor's Note: Reverend Howard served as pastor of Bethany Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey, from 2000 to 2015.]

SI: Wow.

MWH: And some of the greatest artists, contemporary, today, have played in this forum.

SI: You graduated in the Spring of 1968. Is that right?

MWH: Yes.

SI: Just before that would have been the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King. Do you remember that? [Editor's Note: On April 4, 1968, Dr. King was assassinated by James Earl Ray as he stood on a hotel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee.]

MWH: Oh, yes. I remember seeing him in the casket. That was tough, man.

I was at the Mental Health Institute on April 4th, and I remember sitting in the nurse's station, which is where we'd write our reports and we'd gather to get briefings on who to see and who to sit with, and so on. We heard this loud scream, like a primordial, "Ah." It was really a horrible sound. Naturally, all of the staff, they just [said], "What on Earth is that?" So, we ran to the area, because you had, like, attempted suicides and all this kind of thing going on. We didn't know what this was.

So, as we were going back, I remember people coming, grabbing me, and they said, "They shot Dr. King." This was--the client community, it was interracial, but it was overwhelmingly white--and everybody was terrified, because it was a destabilizing event, you see. People who have these kinds of challenges thrive a little better when things are calm, so, this is really--they were screaming, not so much because they loved Dr. King or they aspired to his ideals or any of that. Maybe some of that [was] true, too, but it was mostly because something really dramatic had happened and they were yelling, "They shot Dr. King."

Now, he wasn't pronounced dead by then, but, before we left, because I was on the four to twelve shift, he had died, died earlier in the evening. The Georgia Mental Health Institute is on the northeast side of Atlanta, near Emory University. Where I lived, near the college, was on the southwest side of Atlanta. As I drove across the city, against the skyline, you saw flames; as I got closer to the community, shops on fire, people running through the streets, that whole night, April 4th, sirens. [Editor's Note: In April and May 1968, riots erupted in 125 US cities, including Chicago, Baltimore and Washington, DC, sparked by the assassination of Dr. King.]

On April the 5th, there is a mass meeting in the gymnasium of Morehouse College. One of the people who was leading that, the talking part of that meeting, was Dr. Vincent Harding, who, later, I got to know as a great friend, prominent historian. He was on the faculty at Spelman at the time. He was very much an advisor to SNCC people, from New York, from Harlem. He was a student of John Hope Franklin's--you know that name?

[Editor's Note: Dr. Vincent Harding (1931-2014), an African American scholar and historian, became active in the Civil Rights Movement by working with SCLC, SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Atlanta. A confidant of Dr. King, Dr. Harding drafted some of his orations, including his April 4, 1967 anti-Vietnam speech, "A Time to Break Silence," at Riverside Church in New York City. Dr. John Hope Franklin (1915-2009), an African American scholar and historian best-known for his book *From Slavery to Freedom*, was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1995.]

SI: Yes.

MWH: So, Vincent Harding, University of Chicago Ph.D., and so on. I am really feeling bad. I'm really feeling a kind of grief, a kind of hurt, but Harding is talking about, "This is the moment to mobilize." It was a kind of--I won't say he was using [it], but it felt to me that he was using the tragedy to awaken us into some kind of action. At that moment, I was interested in grieving. So, I was really caught off guard by this, but it was a powerful experience. Dr. Harding was a very, very persuasive and capable orator, and other people spoke, but I remember him. So, that sort of threw into my mind, "What is this going to mean?"

I will say, Shaun, I am very good at the long view, but I'm not very good at summing up what's happening, especially if it's very dramatic. I'm not very good at summing up right now, what is transpiring right now. Within a day or so, the utility companies were coming into the campus area, running lines, electrical lines, I mean everywhere, running. I'm saying, "Well, what is going on?" and they're saying, "Well, they're running the wires for the funeral." They had to run extra lines to accommodate the electrical power that would be needed for this big public event, and I'm saying, "Man, what's going on? How do you size this up?"

Pretty soon, the remains of Dr. King, in this week, would lie in state at Spelman, in the Sisters Chapel. We knew that it was being planned, like, organized. So, a few of us went and we saw Dr. King in this casket. I think there was a see-through glass over his face. You could see him, he's there. The next day, you couldn't get near Spelman College. For miles, people were lined up, I mean, literally miles, lined up to see him. We had gone the prior day. We walked right in.

The thing was growing, you see. Then, on the quadrangle of the college was a public service, like a funeral, no remains, just a public event. The eulogy for this event was delivered by Benjamin E. Mays, the esteemed president, now retired. He had retired the year before. The title of that speech, which I commend to you, is, "It's not how long you live, but how well."

As I remember, he began with Joan of Arc, eighteen years old. He kept naming these people who died at an early age, and then, in his unique and gripping oratorical style, he said, "It's not how long you live." Now, who is he talking to? Thousands of college kids, who have no chance of getting into the Ebenezer Church, which is a little church across town. So, he's consoling them. "It's not how long you live, but how well," and keeps going up, Jesus, thirty-three, you see. Then, he gets to King.

I tell my kids all the time, "King never saw forty." He was killed just three, four, well, three months, after his thirty-ninth birthday. My eldest son is forty-one. That speech is quite readily available. I urge you to read it, because I'm not doing it justice, but that was the theme, "It's not how long you live." Look at this, because he would say, "Joan of Arc, eighteen," and then, he would talk about what she meant, right on through.

Then, the day of the big funeral, one of my roommates, who was a pallbearer--not a pallbearer in the customary sense, but he was one of the people chosen to walk alongside the buggy thing that the horses were pulling--then, King was buried in Southwest [South-View] Cemetery, which is a black cemetery in Atlanta, prestigious place.

Remember now, there's a class division by now in the black community, more pronounced as things began to open up racially. So, you see, in the City of Newark, all the black folk, no matter their occupations or income, they used to live right there along Martin Luther [King Boulevard]--well, High Street--in Newark, and so forth, but, once things began to open up, people began to move in different [areas]. They could afford to move, so they could do that. All of that was happening in Atlanta, and it's been happening in Atlanta, because of the nature of Atlanta, for a long time--Southwest [South-View] Cemetery, prestigious place.

Now, you know his remains were exhumed and brought to the Ebenezer Church, where they are now with Mrs. King, but they brought King first, Martin first, but, for a while, they were in the ordinary cemetery. So, we went there for the interment.

The death of King was really an arresting event. In '68--remember, Mays retired in '67--the new president was presiding at his first commencement, Hugh Gloster, with whom I became very close over time. As I matured and went back and forth to the college, he and I developed quite a relationship. [Editor's Note: Dr. Hugh Morris Gloster (1911-2002) served as President of Morehouse College from 1967 to 1987.]

His whole address--the President of NYU was the commencement speaker, but the president can take some time to say some things--his question was something like, "Is there a King among you?" It was a very dramatic challenge to that class. So, in some ways, the death of King, the death of King, especially by then, had a more resounding impact on my generation than the life

of King, because Martin King was so arguably--his vision was so beyond what most of us were capable of thinking at the time.

His concept of what--and we had seen him evolve--his concept of what America is had become more glaring by '68. By '67, April 4, 1967, one year to the very day of his assassination, he gave this prominent speech at the Riverside Church in New York on Vietnam. That speech is so fresh to this moment. A lot of the national struggles we're having right now is foretold in that speech, right, a failure to address "the giant triplets." Have you ever heard of this? The giant triplets--racism, poverty, and war--was our damnation. [Editor's Note: In his April 4, 1967 speech, Dr. King said, "When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered."]

But, in the intervening period, you have also the Black Power Movement, the movement toward Black Nationalism, the embracing of retaliatory violence, revolutionary rhetoric, and so on. You have the emergence of a radical wing of SNCC, a rejection of white allies, the alignment with the PLO [Palestinian Liberation Organization], the internationalization of SNCC, focusing on populations that live in situations comparable to African Americans in this country, the Black Liberation Army, the Black Panther Party--did I mention them?--okay.

These people were taking potshots at King in '66, all like that. King actually never allowed himself to be alienated from his old friends, who had become harsh public critics. So, you should hear Stokely Carmichael's comments. When King decided to speak out against the Vietnam War, SNCC had been there for years. They'd been going back and forth to North Vietnam and being accused of Communism, which was not true, for most of them. [Editor's Note: Stokely Carmichael (1941-1998) held leadership positions in SNCC and the Black Panther Party and helped found the Black Power Movement.]

Stokely said, "When Martin was going to hit that war, I'm going to be on the front pew." So, when he gave his speech at Ebenezer--before Riverside, he gave a sermon at his home church against the war--Stokely was right on the front pew, but, in the '66 period, he was one of the harsh critics, especially after the Meredith March. When was the Meredith March? You know what I mean when I say Meredith March, right?

[Editor's Note: The March Against Fear was a June 1966 march from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi, organized and led by James Meredith (known for his desegregation of the University of Mississippi in 1962) to combat discrimination in the Mississippi Delta region. Meredith began on June 5th, but was shot the next day by a white gunman. This sparked a massive response from Civil Rights groups and individuals (approximately fifteen thousand by its conclusion), who continued the march in his name, registering thousands of African Americans along the way. Meredith rejoined the march just before it concluded in Jackson on June 26th. Stokely Carmichael began publicly promoting the philosophy of Black Power during this event.]

SI: Was that in Mississippi?

MWH: Yes, in Mississippi.

SI: Yes.

MWH: That's when they spoke very, very strongly in terms of black power, and the day of loving your enemy was over and Martin was a relic of a distant past. The March Against Fear, 1966, Martin was vilified, and, frankly, the young activists in SNCC were winning the hearts and minds of the young college age, see.

SI: I was going to ask, could you see that happening at Morehouse? Were people coming more in line with these ideas?

MWH: Oh, yes. Oh, I remember my dear professor, Samuel Williams, having a public debate with Stokely Carmichael. Samuel Williams was a revered intellectual. Stokely Carmichael made him look silly, I mean, because Stokely Carmichael was a great performer, you know what I mean? So, while Sam Williams was standing on solid historical knowledge and intellectual inquiry and perspective, Stokely was this attractive, articulate, proven--I mean, he was actively--he had a lot of creds for his activism, and so on. He'd been head of SNCC and so on.

He was speaking on the college campus of Clark, Clark College, which is right across the street. I remember Dr. Williams, skillful debater, he said to Stokely, "You know, Mr. Carmichael, I know your professors at Howard and they speak very well of you as a student," and so forth. Stokely Carmichael says, "Flattery will get you nowhere." The audience went wild. Now, what on Earth is that? It's a tactic in your debate performance, but it didn't have any substance. I think Stokely would even say that, but the students loved that, his performance.

So, that was where Martin was, see. When he went to Memphis, you see, at a certain point in his career, you would never have kids rioting while Dr. King is trying to lead a march, but you remember, if you know anything about that, the day before he was killed, or a short time before he was killed, he was leading the sanitation workers in Memphis. Young kids are going around looting the stores on the sidelines of the march. So, [there was] this notion that, somehow, it was the season of violent rebellion. Black Nationalist identity was taking over.

King's view of the "world house," which is laid out in his final book, about the interconnection of everything, and his whole thing about, "I am interested in black people being empowered, but not at the expense of other people," these ideas, in my opinion, have grown currency post-'68. So, you find people, like [African American philosopher and Harvard University Professor] Cornel West and others, who revere King. They now see, right, that King's view was a bit further out, beyond what the contemporary mind could absorb.

So, really, we went on that journey of reevaluating and coming to terms with King's philosophy and, also, learning more about that philosophy in notes from SCLC retreats and papers that we collected from him. We've come to understand his vision was so far out beyond what we could imagine at the time. So, he's quite an icon. He's grown, but his death began that process, because, in the latter days of his life, he had "the young Turks" pulling at his legacy.

SI: Let me pause for a second.

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