

## Heeding the Call

by Diana Childress

Letters home expressed the fifteen-year-old's amazement. "The white people here are very nice," Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote his parents from Connecticut, where on his first trip north, he spent the summer of 1944 harvesting tobacco. "We go to any place we want to and sit any where we want to. On an outing to Hartford, he and his friends "ate in one of the finest restaurants."

Returning to the segregated South after that pleasant summer was a "bitter pill" for the young man. King later wrote that his experiences in 1944 gave him "an inescapable urge to serve society."

Growing up on Atlanta's Auburn Avenue, young M. L., as his family called him, enjoyed a happy, middle-class life with baseball games, a paper route, and Boy Scout meetings. His father was the respected preacher at Ebenezer Baptist Church, his mother a college-educated musician. His grandmother, who lived with the family, doted on him. He was close to his studious older sister, Christine, and his rambunctious younger brother, Alfred Daniel, known as A. D. M. L. excelled in school and skipped so many grades that he started college at fifteen.

But even as a young child, M. L. noticed social problems. Among his earliest memories were the long bread lines during the Depression. He learned about racial discrimination at age six, when the two sons of a white neighborhood storekeeper stopped playing with him. M. L.'s mother explained segregation to him but told him to remember that "you are as good as anyone."

M. L. saw how his father refused to be humiliated by discrimination. When a shoe salesman asked them to move to the "colored" section of the store, Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., replied, "We'll either buy shoes sitting here or we won't buy shoes at all." Then he took his son's hand and walked out.

During high school, M. L. won first prize in a speech contest and traveled to represent his school at a statewide competition on the theme "The Negro and the Constitution." M. L. eloquently voiced the need to translate "the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments from writing on the printed page to actuality." Returning to Atlanta by bus, he experienced that need firsthand when he and his teacher were ordered to give up their seats to white passengers. They stood in the aisle for the ninety-mile trip. "It was a night I'll never forget," King said later. "I don't think I have ever been so deeply angry in my life."

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Entering Atlanta's Morehouse College in 1944, M. L. first planned to be a doctor, then decided he could help others better as a lawyer. He majored in sociology, which offered many courses focusing on racial issues. He joined the college chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and served on the biracial Intercollegiate Council, where he discovered that a spirit of cooperation between blacks and whites was possible even in the South.

By his senior year, M. L. realized that he wanted to become a minister. His father, overjoyed, asked him to preach at Ebenezer. M. L.'s trial sermon won so much praise that his father appointed him assistant pastor. But M. L. was not ready to follow so closely in his father's footsteps. He wanted to learn more, to deepen his understanding of theology, and to prove to himself at a white seminary that he was, as his mother had told him, "as good as anyone."

Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania, introduced M. L. to challenging new ways of thinking about religion and its role in modern life. Some nights he was so excited by ideas that he stayed up all night reading about Walter Rauschenbusch's vision of social justice, Mohandas Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence, or Reinhold Niebuhr's argument that political power was necessary to defeat social evil. He graduated first in his class. Eager to probe still deeper into the thinking of modern theologians, M. L. applied to Boston University to work toward a doctorate in philosophy.

In Boston, he met Coretta Scott, who was studying to be a singer. M. L. knew right away that she was the woman he wanted to marry and soon convinced her and his parents to agree. Wed at Coretta's home in Alabama during the summer of 1953, the couple began married life in Boston as M. L. finished his courses and began writing his doctoral dissertation.

In the Spring of 1954, twenty-five-year-old Martin Luther King, Jr., had to decide whether to stay in the North, where Coretta could more easily pursue her singing career, or return to the South. Both M. L. and Coretta felt "a moral obligation" to return to the South. M. L. chose to accept the pastorate at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

It was a fateful choice. The following year, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery bus, the African American community, ready to take action against segregation, asked the scholarly, soft-spoken preacher to lead their protest.

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