Rev. Ronald English

Where: West Virginia Humanities Council

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Interviewer: Emily Hilliard and Rick Wilson

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Rev. Ronald English of Charleston, WV was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1944. He grew up in the community surrounding the Ebenezer Baptist Church of Atlanta and his family was close with the family of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. English is a graduate of Morehouse College and served as ministerial assistant to Drs. Martin Luther King Jr. and Sr. He delivered a prayer at the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

English was called to the First Baptist Church of Charleston in 1972 where he served for 21 years. He now serves as an interim minister in Charleston and is a consultant in healing and restorative justice.

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RE: Rev. Ronald English

EH: Emily Hilliard

RW: Rick Wilson

00:00
EH: Okay, could you introduce yourself and tell me your name, when you were born and where you were born?

RE: Ronald English, born 1944 in Atlanta, Georgia.

EH: And what do you do here in Charleston?

RE: Right now I'm interim minister and also a consultant in healing justice, restorative justice documentary that we have marketed across the state in order to get conversations going about restorative justice.

EH: Why don't you tell me about your family background.

RE: Born in Atlanta, 1944 was right after the war and we lived in what was kind of a lower-middle class community which was inclusive of Ebenezer Baptist Church where my mother and father met and were married and they were very close to the King family [Martin Luther King and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s family]. They met in the choir that she directed and so...and my grandfather had been deacon in the church and his name's on a cornerstone of the historic church Jethro English, Sr. and so that was kind of the neighborhood we grew up. I went to a Catholic school for about 6 years and that was an interesting experience. My mother thought it was a better educational environment but it was a challenge in other kind of restrictive ways and also Dr. King did not really like that and he often reminded my mother that "That boy going to a Catholic church, you oughta be ashamed of yourself!"

EH: (laughs)

RE: (laughs) So that was the kind of thing they had going on for a long time. And then I remember Dr. King when he was a student at Crozer Seminary, because he would come home during the summer. And his father would have him to preach during the summer and we really looked forward to that because he usually preached about 20 minutes and his dad would go on for about 45, so (laughs) we would really look forward to him coming on. So it was around the community that they called Sweet Auburn Avenue in Atlanta and that was the kind of the place where Black businesses that did not have access or Black folk that, we didn't have access to a lot of the services, they proved themselves very self-sufficient. So there were 2 banks, 2 insurance companies, funeral home, and at that time the World Famous Royal Peacock where some very outstanding guests would come from Jackie Wilson to and I just can't remember all of those right now, but it was a world famous place on Auburn Avenue and so Auburn Avenue was kind of like the Wall Street of the South in Atlanta and it really was the answer to segregation in terms of knowing how self-sufficiently we were able to survive and that was really a strong stake in survival in that time growing up in Atlanta.

EH: And how long did you live in Atlanta?

RE: I lived here until I came here in 1972. And that was quite a shift (laughs) I would not have come had it not been for the invitation to pastor at First Baptist Church of Charleston because I hadn't had any exposure to West Virginia except a 5th grade teacher, who I thought was one of the meanest teachers in our elementary school. Her name was Miss Nolan, and she would come in demanding respect by saying, "I'm from the hills of West Virginia and I don't take no stuff." And I thought that wherever West Virginia is, I do not want to be there. (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

RE: So it was kind of interesting when the call came by way of a friend of mine who was on the pulpit committee and she recommended me and that's how I got to have an invitation to speak at First Baptist and they extended the call for me to come in 1972.

RW: So one thing I think's interesting is that Vernon Johns who's been called the forerunner of Dr. King...

RE: Oh yeah.

RW: Was a pastor here like in the 30s and 40s, right?

RE: Oh yeah.

RW: Was that an attractive factor for you to come here?

RE: Oh yeah, yeah, it was. When I found out something about the history of First Baptist. Vernon Johns was there but before him was a minister by the name of Mordecai Johnson and Mordecai Johnson left there and went to be president of Howard University and was kind of like one of the founding, not only just presidents of Howard but also significant in how Howard University became a very powerful and prestigious Black university. And then Vernon Johns had been here twice because he had a kind of--he had a brilliant mind--he could speak about 2 or 3 different languages. Well he was from Virginia and he had a strong entrepreneurial bent and so First Baptist was very prestigious, but he believed in self-sufficiency to the extent of self-entrepreneurship so he owned a vegetable wagon that he would pull around to the front of the church and he had hams on there from Virginia and he would sell 'em, but that was kind of a violation of what the church's image was supposed to represent, and so he would often be chided about selling those hams. He said for every call I get for the sick, I get 5 calls for hams and so (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

RW: (laughs)

RE: So he was just...and he was Dr. King's predecessor at Dexter [Avenue Baptist Church] because he was kind of sort of ushered out of First Baptist but and he went to Dexter you know, and that's where he served as the predecessor to Martin Luther King and was acknowledged as the forerunner to the movement.

06:49

EH: Oh, okay. So was he sort of mentor to Doctor King or he had just been a leader in civil rights?

RE: He had been a leader in civil rights. He was not a mentor of Dr. King. I think the King family knew him and had invited him to preach at Ebenezer in Atlanta, but he was not directly a mentor of Dr. King in that sense.

EH: What was Dr. King like?

RE: I often get asked that question and it shifts in my head every time I think about it. He had a sense of humor that was not often seen because he presented himself in the persona of what he was expected to do and to be. And he did, when we were growing up, he did take some time with us. Ironically, he never, and it might have been because he was concerned about what might happen, but he never campaigned for any of us to actually join the movement. I went to the March on Washington, participated in some sit-ins in Atlanta, but he never really pushed that on us. He would mention it absolutely in every sermon, but he never really kind of pushed that. But I admired him from the standpoint of leadership in terms of how, and his staff would often say, and how he was able to gel the minds of a very diverse group that was in that cadre. Andrew Young was kind of like the more conservative. Wyatt Tee Walker who I knew was the executive director and he was a little bit more of a firebrand. And then Hosea Williams was a firebrand and so having that kind of respect from that kind of cadre where they would all express their opinions, particularly in the circles where there were planning at SCLC and he would let them go out at it, but then he would also be the one they consulted after everybody had had their...so he was a collaborative leader--that's what I'm getting at--and his charisma you know, showed up in that way, as well as the national stage, in terms of his speaking, but he was a model of collaboration and became the symbol for how he wanted the organization to represent and be duplicated in other organizations during the movement, so that was a lot that comes to mind, but those things just in the moment you know, kind of come up. Yeah.

09:41

EH: Did he continue to have a relationship with Ebenezer as he, you know, throughout the rest of his life?

RE: Oh yeah, he was co-pastor. He was called there to be co-pastor after he left Montgomery, and he did that because he wanted to set up, after the Montgomery movement, he wanted to set up SCLC headquarters in Atlanta. And so he did that and SCLC headquarters was on Auburn Avenue, a walk from Ebenezer, and so that was why that was so convenient. So yeah, he came to pastor Ebenezer as co-pastor. I've forgotten the precise date that he did that but yeah, so he was very much there. And we saw the, well I participated in the funeral but one of the things that comes up most now is how his last speech resonates so much with me. "It doesn't matter to me now. I've been to the mountaintop."

EH: Is that also where he is critical of the Vietnam War?

RE: Oh yeah.

EH: And kind of calling for a more socialist radical...

RE: About a year before his assassination, he had made the speech against the Vietnam War at Riverside Church, 1967 in April of 1967 and he also had made that speech at Ebenezer, but I was speaking of the one that he made in Memphis.

EH: Oh, yeah.

RE: Which I have given more thought to recently in terms of how it really said that he was at rest. And I've often believed that as the bullet hit his neck he probably said, "free at last." And he had often said that he was not, he had long conquered the fear of death. So in that sense when he was talking about, "It really

doesn't matter," it means that he had found out what really mattered. And his life did not matter in terms of what he had given to it. And the vision of going to the mountaintop and looking over and then the notion of "I may not get there, but we as a people..." That's a powerful piece that I don't think anybody had, well, I'm sure everybody's thought about, but I guess it just kinda come to me more recently in terms of talking about how there is a sense of a vision, there is a sense of a collective movement beyond what we feel are imperatives against that now. And the need for having some spiritual motivation, knowing what matters and how it matters and also what does not matter. And that's a critical choice.

RW: He was there actually in solidarity with some workers who were on strike--garbage workers in Memphis.

RE: Oh yeah.

EH: Yeah, the sanitation workers.

RE: Oh yeah absolutely. That's what took him there.

12:59

EH: And I mean so some people say that that speech--he kind of had this foresight of what might be ahead.

RE: I think there's something to that. And that was probably what, that was kind of like what I meant, kind of elaborating on that theme and ironically, he was not supposed to be there that particular night because he caught a cold and he was back at the hotel and Ralph, Ralph Abernathy had gone over to take his place to speak for him. And when Ralph got there and saw how folks were there to hear him, he called back and said "Martin, you gotta come." And that's when he got up and went.

But there's something I've always noticed about the camera's position on his face during that last speech. You never see that, I haven't seen that particular position at the lower left side. Most shots are face on. But this one was kinda lower left side and it had that perspective and as he looked to his left as he was making the speech, the intensity in his eyes says something about his preparedness. And that just has always gripped me in terms of how the way he looked as he said that was really a way of confirming what he expected and how fortunate it was that he did get there that night to make that speech as his final one.

14:39

EH: What was your role in the funeral?

RE: I served as his assistant for a couple of years at Ebenezer [unintelligible] ministry, and he ordained me, I mean he licensed me, along with his father, at the church, and so I served as his assistant minister of youth at Ebenezer. And he often wanted to be where he could not be, but I remember times when he did entertain us and one time went over to his father's house--he was there and he just kind of wanted to be regular and get down with being with us and you know, let us know how available, how concerned he was, and how much he cared and loved us and all that. And he got at the piano and started playing a Beethoven sonata. And we didn't know he could do that, but he transformed that right quickly into the boogie woogie and he was running his left hand up and down the keyboard as though--and so that was just kind of a way doc would show his sense of humor in ways that were surprising, but he also was connecting with us because he was also saying, "It's not all that serious!" (laughs)

EH: (laughs)

RE: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. So he had that side of him.

RW: So you've got some good stories here. There's a poster on the wall about the Textbook Wars...

RE: Oh yeah. (laughs)

RW: You kind of walked right into that when you got here, didn't you?

RE: Yeah, I forgot about that! Yeah, not long after I got here, they were changing the curriculum at the Board of Education, and they were being more inclusive. Because that was the kind of time when Black history had become a dominant theme in terms of how the movement would be continued and it kind of showed where we had made some advances as far as the civil rights agenda. That there were portions of American history that had been totally ignored and left out and therefore one of the phases of the Black history movement that really began a Black consciousness movement that developed out of Oakland and that area of California, was the insistence of recognizing Black presence in American history. And so that was part of what had taken place at the time that the Board of Education decided to make some adjustments in terms of their curriculum. And some of the books that were in there were kind of offensive to some conservative politicians, Christians, and all that. I can remember particularly Eldridge Cleaver being one of the objected texts (laughs) and because there was some cursing and that was just some of what we call some authentic expressions of what it meant being Black (laughs). And that was very offensive to some folk around here. And I served on the text book committee that was reviewing the books and they didn't have that at the Board of Education. They had it at a place out where the book, I've forgotten, it's kind of a small community where they wanted to be out of the fair of being in the midst of where they could be, where folks could get hurt. Well, in the process of being up there, and as this momentum developed for and Alice Moore was on the Board of Education and her husband was a minister, and she was a conservative fundamentalist and so she, and she was very articulate in terms of how well she was able to engage people in terms of protesting. And so that was really a time when she was able to do that and people who had obviously not read the books felt like this was a time for making protests. So that's why it became kind of a cultural war (clears throat). And it has been given some credit as being the roots of a cultural war in West Virginia. And so one of the aspects of it was, in terms of that book protest, became symbolic of a cultural war in our community that then went to a larger dimension across the nation and I think a documentary, I'm sure, has been done on that, that would come to mind to me in a moment.

But then that kind of set up looking at how inclusive the curriculum was, and also how other aspects of education was also in a state that needed to be challenged. So that was the significant moment as far as being introduced into what it meant to be in West by God Virginia.

EH: (laughs)

RE: Yeah.

RW: You have another West Virginia story that puts us in a little bit better space. The police? You had a couple experiences with law enforcement I believe that...

RE: Oh yeah, yeah. And I often use that in training not only with law enforcement but in general in terms of how unconscious bias is something that afflicts us all. I mean it's not just on one side of the spectrum. And so I contracted-- contrasted 2 events: one that had happened to me down south and one that happened to me here. Down south I was, my dad and I kinda had a janitorial service as I was working my way through college at Morehouse by doing that on the weekends and I was on the way back from a place that

we, I had cleaned in Stone Mountain, Georgia. And it was about maybe 1, 1:30 or so in the morning and on this road back, there must have been something about the Dodge Dot that I was driving at the time--red Dodge Dot--that attracted the attention of a state trooper.

EH: (laughs)

RE: (laughs) And so he pulled up behind me, lights on, and I knew I wasn't speeding, you know, and so when he pulled up and came up to the car and asked for license and all that, and I was asking him why had he stopped me. By that time, I was standing before him as he was getting my information and he pulled out the flashlight from his belt and hit me in the palm of my right hand, or hit my right hand with such impact that it almost broke a couple of fingers. And said, "N****r I don't have to have a reason to stop you!" And all of a sudden, nobody was coming anywhere down the road and it was just me and him and those notions about what could happen in that kind of situation really sprung very--yeah. Yeah. Therefore, I was really glad when he said, "Get in the back of the car." Well, not quite then, but when he said "Get in the back of the car," I started to really fear, fearing what was gonna happen next. So I was really glad when we did get to the jail because that meant that what I had feared most was not something that had happened. And so had to spend the night in jail because at that time somebody who didn't have bail money, who didn't live in the area, there were complications as far as the bail process that took all night.

But I came here in West Virginia and I had taken my family up to New York and we were coming back down what is now I-79. At that time, it was not completed. Well, it was completed, but they didn't have very many gas services open. And I had forgotten to get gas in Pittsburgh coming down 79 and I was about to run out of gas around Clarksburg. And I saw a state trooper sign saying, "State trooper facility" and I felt like I could pull in there and park and at least be safe until the stations opened in the morning. As soon as I pull in there, this state trooper comes out fully dressed and as he's headed toward me, I'm thinking this is not gonna be good, because of my memory of what had happened before. And he came up to the window and asked me, "Can I help you?" And that was a total shock. And I said, "Yeah, I'm in a situation where I'm about to run out of gas and I thought I could be safe if I got in here." And he said, "Well, I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna call Joe who has a gas station about a couple miles from here. And I'm going say to him 'You're gonna have to open that gas station early this morning because he has a customer on the way.'" (sighs) He did that and then he said, "I'm gonna follow you and your family over there just in case." And he did that. And I was thinking, when I use that, it's because I had transferred the bias of the prior trooper who I felt dangerous to this trooper who wanted to help. And I was so impressed with that, I remember writing the governor who was Governor Arch Moore at the time, telling him how this trooper really not only represented the troopers of West Virginia, but the state of West Virginia in terms of how I had come to experience that as being something different than I had encountered before. And expected, you know. So it just kind of shows patterns of unconscious bias unroll in all of us.

EH: But that's also in this case, a survival mechanism too. You know I mean, I think about that when I'm walking down the street by myself at night and anyone feels like a threat, you know?

RE: Oh yeah, uh-huh.

EH: But it's just a survival mechanism.

RE: Exactly, exactly. And in that sense it's a part of our natural response to protect ourselves, but in that social kind of context, it became kind of a transformative moment.

EH: Yeah, yeah. So when you arrived here--so I know there were sit-ins in Charleston that predated the Greensboro sit-in, but at that point it was '72 so was there sort of an existing civil rights movement here?

26:37

RE: That had been as I understood it and found out, the sit-in movement here at the Diamond was a part of what one group that was affiliated with the NAACP and then there was an organization that got an affiliation with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SCLC, and Homer Davis, I remember who was a minister here and a well-known activist in the community was responsible for engaging SCLC to come here. And so they had a protest downtown and I'm not sure if there were arrests, but that was an arousal (laughs) of...So in that sense that had been the groundwork for some expression of the civil rights activist agenda in Charleston. But that was a little before I came and so it was kind of like still in the air in terms of what had happened and how people had been engaged in that. But they moved on. Another thing that had happened in Charleston that people were engaged in and activists were around, but they move on because other conditions and opportunities that become more available. But yeah, I do recall and I think I still have some pictures of that kind of activist engagement before I came in the early '70s.

RW: Now there was another big fight that I think you were here for, about the whole urban renewal of the Triangle District and the mall and all that sort of dismantling?

RE: Yeah, [Rev.] Matthew Watts, a good friend of mine, has really done some extensive documentation on that and we had a showing of a film that talked about how in other communities had been very destructive. By the way, the Triangle area had already been destroyed when I came here and at the time that I came, what is now the Super Block was just vacant land. And they were dealing with the issues of what to do with the people who had moved and that kind of thing and urban renewal responsibility for those who had moved and some had gotten better housing and that's when some other housing projects you know, happened in the area. But it never restored the kind of community that was in the Triangle District, because the Triangle District was generously a very cross-section of cultural experiences (laughs).

29:41

EH: So what do you mean by that?

RE: Well! And I did not see this, but it's very well known that the Triangle had a place called Friar's Alley. And Friar's Alley I'm told, a place where a lot of exchange of money for all kinds of services...

EH: Got it.

RE: ...were extended and negotiated (laughs) and it was a very not only...I'll put it like this. Miners, I'm told, would come up and they would head for Friar's Alley. And so it was a very cross-cultural mix in that area that provided those very lively services (laughs) and cultural exchanges and that kind of thing. And so it seemed like it had kind of a [huge?] culture. But I was surprised when I came here the first time to find out the First Baptist was downtown. Because most First Baptist churches, even those that are Black, which were kinda rare from my experience, had been out somewhere else. And so to find that it was right down in the heart of town was kind of interesting, but then I found out that there had been a Black community in that area that had a hotel, still had 2 funeral homes, but this had been a place of Black enterprise back in the day. And that Triangle area and what happened with downtown, and also what happened when people closed and people died and moved on, kinda destroyed that hub of Black capitalism. And that was what was happening at the time that I came and then as I saw the development from the Super Block from there. But it was a time of focused transition at the time that I showed up here.

31:58

EH: Rick, do you have a question?

RW: Yeah, I know in addition to being a pastor, you have a passion and a lot of experience working in and around prisons. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

RE: Yeah. A very good friend of mine was the Deputy Commissioner of Corrections and at the time I was in transition, he said that Mount Olive, I mean the maximum security prison for adult offenders was Moundsville and they were moving here to an area called Mount Olive, to upper Kanawha Valley. And he thought that that was gonna be a kind of transition in the administration and that it would become more inclusive and so he was asking me about being a part of that shift and so I was one of two unit mangers up there. And that was another person. But that was my first experience in the criminal justice system as an administrator. Didn't take long for me to find out, that was not for me! (laughs) But I stayed there a while. But at the same time, it has more recently, and I just had a conversation this morning with the Deputy Commissioner of Corrections about how we can institute some practices of restorative justice in the criminal justice system. And he was very receptive to that and talked about how particularly in areas that housing teenagers because the school-to-prison complex, I mean school-to-prison, has been dominant in terms of how many teenagers are affected and so there are several youth facilities, youth detention facilities around. But he was saying that the correctional officers at those youth detention centers have reminded them that they are maximum security inmates! And he said when you tell a child, a young man, that they are maximum security, they start thinking in terms of maximum security! As far as the label and how that label kind of plots a path! And so I was really interested that he wanted to do something about that or that had engaged his interest as being an entry point in the criminal justice system in a facility that was small enough to, if it made a difference, it could become kind of a model, so that's where the direction of his thinking was going. I was very glad to hear that because that is a part of where we are now with mass incarceration and how we can use that as a way of shifting not only punishment for offenders who are not dangerous, but how we shift the consciousness of how offenders need to be treated. And that was one of the things that I recognized at Mount Olive that made it difficult for me to stay there (laughs) because down south there was folks were known as n****r lovers when they crossed over and so in that context I was known as an inmate lover (laughs) because of trying to treat folks decently and with respect.

35:51

EH: Are you involved in any Poor Peoples Campaign or any movements like that today?

RE: We started the Poor Peoples--we started last year when they had the national march on the Poor Peoples Campaign and West Virginia was involved in that and I was one of the co-chairs for the state's involvement and we had a march here in summer of last year, I believe. Yeah. Leading up to the march that they had in Washington 2 years ago. So didn't happen this year, it was last year. So in that sense I was involved in the organization of the Poor People's Campaign as we had it here in Charleston and the meeting that we had at the Capitol, which really went better than I thought. It was really quite cross-sectional in terms of labor, NAACP and some local groups and then...so there was some enthusiasm. It's difficult to maintain momentum in an organization like that when the goals of the Poor Peoples Campaign were kind of widespread and understood that you know, because it went from economic empowerment to protests about mass incarceration and then it had a broad agenda. So when it has something, when an organization has that kind of a broad agenda, then it's a challenge for a local group to figure out what part of this would be actionable as far as becoming involved, or actionable for activism. And that's where it kind of broke down in terms of what was happening at that time that was sustained momentum of the

Poor People's Campaign in West Virginia. And I think that happened somewhat, that had happened on a national scale as well because the agenda as a national agenda and, is very well-focused in terms of what the issues are, but the strategies for the movement are a little fuzzy in terms of local application in certain areas. And certain areas are big cities, Detroit and Chicago, maybe, and some other areas like that where there's kind of an in-bred activism going on with referencing some things that the organizations are doing. But here in West Virginia it was a challenge to mount that kind of massive mobilization.

39:10

RW: A couple more things I'll just mention if you want to riff on them. I believe you went to an institution of higher education that's kind of another landmark, is that right?

RE: Oh yeah.

RW: You went to school with a certain former presidential candidate, is that...Herman?

RE: Oh yeah! (laughs) I forgot about that one.

RW: Yeah. (laughs)

RE: Yeah, I went to Morehouse College of Atlanta and in the Glee Club there was this fellow by the name of Herman Cain. And he and I were very good friends because he didn't live too far from where I lived. And sometimes we would even ride to school together and so he was a nice guy, you know, I think he even dated my sister for a little bit and all that, and so and I knew the church where he had been ordained as a minister where a very good friend of mine, Cameron Alexander was pastor and so to find out that...and Cameron had been an activist as far as the civil rights movement and had an awesome reputation in Atlanta for a lot of things along that line and so I'm just thinking, Herman is really getting good mentorship and all that. So when he announced his candidacy and then came across in another form of radicalized conservatism, I'm going like, what happened to that guy? (laughs)

RW: (laughs)

40:37

RE: I don't...I'm trying to figure out what. But ironically.

RW: Pizza, maybe...

RE: Yeah, yeah, yeah. His first boom was Godfather's Pizza, you know, became president of Godfather's and moved it and...but that was how he accumulated the wealth and I would see him every once in a while on TV but yeah, when he got into the campaign and we never talked about this directly, because he had gotten into the campaign and I had preached at the church where his mentor invited me to come, and he was there that Sunday, but we just kind of exchanged...pleasantries (laughs).

EH: (laughs)

RE: Didn't want to open up a political debate. So I never had a chance to ask him what shifted in his consciousness that brought him to this place where he is now. But you know, that was an interesting transition of somebody that I knew kind of up close and was surprised what happened as far as his current bent of political persuasion.

RW: Morehouse was a major institution, right, to attend there?

41:57

RE: Oh yeah.

RW: What was that like?

RE: Yeah, I graduated in the year that Dr. Benjamin Mays retired. That was 1967 and he was the president that really brought Morehouse into its prominence and he was a, kind of like, spiritual mentor to Martin Luther King Jr. At the same time, he was very insistent on maintaining the economics, I mean the academic standard that not only was required but what he expected in terms of Morehouse education and would not make any exceptions to students who chose to be activists. For example, Julian Bond was a promising student and he was scheduled for graduation but he became involved in SNCC and he and some others that were students there became very committed to SNCC because that was the time that SNCC in the post-civil rights era was really developing a presence. So he decided that he was gonna commit to SNCC and so Dr. Mays told him and several other activists, said "Now, we are proud of your activism, but Morehouse cannot suspend its standards in favor of your activism." And apparently that worked because 2 years, about 3 or 4 years later, Bond came back to Morehouse to get his grad, I mean to get his degree. And so that kind of mentorship put Morehouse in a premiere position of being the breeding ground of a Martin Luther King Jr. and several others, but it also helped to show how the standard of excellence was maintained by its president Benjamin Elijah Mays.

EH: So maybe he wasn't really about tearing down the structures but achieving excellence and a high level within the structures.

RE: Right.

RW: One other thing, in addition to being a Baptist pastor, you're kind of interested in mindfulness and some of that, is that...?

RE: Yeah, um...

RW: How did you get there?

RE: (sighs) You know I'm trying to remember exactly how I did. I think I went on a retreat on centering prayer--that's what it was. A friend of mine invited me to go on a retreat on centering prayer that was held in Colorado and at that time it kind of had a fresh audience and so I found some things in that that I really appreciated in terms of it being different from my tradition and it was more kind of grounded in a contemplative tradition, kind of a Quaker tradition. And by the way, one of the spiritual fathers of Dr. King was a man by the name of Howard Thurman and Howard Thurman chose not to be active in the movement itself but he was a resource of spiritual transformation and he founded the church of, the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco and then he became the Dean of Chapel at Boston University. He had a very kind of a collective, community and cosmic consciousness about what it is that controls the way that we behave and think and understand the unity of the human race. And that was something that kind of intrigued me.

But the centering prayer retreat was one thing that kind of got me on the path of spiritual transformation in a more quiet way. Because in Baptist churches and in our tradition, you know, making noise (laughs) making joyful noise is the way we celebrate! And so this was totally different than what I had thought had experienced. But when I found it, it has kinda been something I've been in and out of for at different times

but more recently the contemplative work of Richard Rohr has really engaged my attention and how you can be activist and spiritually oriented at the same time. I mean it's not like you have to retreat in order to, you can retreat and engage at the same time. But it's a way of kind of centering on what it is that you, as Howard Thurman used to say, what it is that you want want. Rather than what is expected of you. And that has been a kind of a way of me dealing with what's beneath the surface. What's going on in the basement, what's moving underground.

RW and EH: (laughs)

RE: You know because when you kind of shove a lot of things that you're expected to do and particularly it was a burden as well as a blessing, but sometimes more of a burden to be somebody associated with Martin Luther King Jr. because you know, you're kind of expected to do some of that. And the expectation is kind of internal as well, and when it seemed like that's not being achieved, then that could be a place of depression and all that kind of good stuff. So this was liberating in order to see that the basic questions are those that are answered from the inside, rather than those that are assumed from the outside as far as who we are and what we want to do. And so the contemplative tradition has really engaged my interest in a lot of ways more recently and I found a place in it that feels at home.

EH: Do you share that with your congregation at all?

RE: No... (laughs)

RW: (laughs)

EH: It's a personal practice!

RE: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. That's a good part about being an interim minister. You have, I've served 3 congregations as a interim and I call interim ministry "ministry in the meantime to keep the meantime from getting so mean." So it's a ministry in transition. The church is in transition. So you try to go an attend to what it is that they think are important and you kinda keep up the service, preaching ministry, and counseling ministry if you are engaged in doing that. But yeah, in our tradition, when there's a place in a service called the meditation, you know, you would think that means quiet, but in Baptist circles, no, that doesn't mean quiet.

EH & RW: (laugh)

RE: That means preparation for the sermon by way of what the choir's gonna sing and sometimes that can get, that can really be a joyful noise! And so the whole notion about meditation and contemplation is very strange to us and so it's called for a shift in my own mind, body, and spirit in terms of how to deal with that. And that's still going on. But yeah, no it's not something that if I was Catholic or some other tradition, yeah, it would be kinda like in the frame of what would be expected. But this is out of the frame of what it means in our tradition of celebration and spirituality.

EH: Well we really just scratched the surface, but we should probably let you go so you can get to your appointment. Well thank you very much!

RE: Thank you.

50:23

END OF TAPE

END OF INTERVIEW