

Chapter One

A MOST UNCOMMON COMMON GROUND

From the beginning of our friendship, Daddy King wanted me to know a little bit about him and even more about Ebenezer Baptist Church. The church takes its name from the bible, “Then Samuel took a rock...and named it Ebenezer, for he said, “This far the Lord has helped us.” 1 Samuel 7:12. Ebenezer means “stone of help.”

He was born Michael King on December 19, 1899, in Stockbridge, Georgia, to Delia and James King, the eldest son of nine children. The King family were sharecroppers but young Michael quit what amounted to slave labor when his father’s boss threatened him after pointing out how his family was being mistreated. It was then that he decided he wanted to be a minister and more particularly wanted to fashion himself after ministers who preached racial equality. In 1918, he left Stockbridge for Atlanta, where his sister Woodie was boarding with Rev. Adam Daniel Williams, Pastor of Ebenezer since 1894. It was Pastor Williams who

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led the church through its developmental period, finally to the 407 Auburn Avenue location. It was this same Pastor Williams who encouraged Michael to finish his high school education and to become a preacher.

In 1926, Michael began his ministerial degree at Morehouse and on Thanksgiving Day married Pastor Williams' daughter Alberta, after eight years of courtship. Just past noon on January 15, 1929, a son was born to Michael and Alberta in an upstairs bedroom at 501 Auburn Avenue, one block from Ebenezer Church, in the midst of the neighborhood known as Sweet Auburn. A daughter, Willie Christine, followed in 1927, and a son, Alfred Daniel (AD), in 1930.

Following Rev. Williams' death in March 1931, Rev. King became pastor of Ebenezer. These were not easy times, the country in the midst of the Great Depression, and church finances were in dire straits. The three King children were sent to live with their grandparents. Rev. King organized the church's small membership and held fundraising drives, restoring Ebenezer to a strong financial basis. By 1934, Rev. King had become a widely respected leader in black Baptist circles and changed his name from Michael to Martin Luther King, reflecting his admiration for the German religious reformer. But it wasn't the sale of indulgences that kindled the fire of reformation in Daddy King; it was the need for an educated, politically active black ministry that turned the pulpit of Ebenezer into a bully pulpit of social reform. He led the fight for equal pay among Georgia teachers and also played an instrumental role in ending Jim Crow laws in the state, which had relegated blacks to a segregated subordinate state since the end of the Civil War. At the height of his political involvement, Daddy

King was a spearhead of the civil rights movement long before his illustrious son, rising to the head of the NAACP in Atlanta and the Civic & Political League.

During the course of our initial conversation many of the details were delivered casually and when it seemed Daddy King could not recall dates he paused, scratched his head and made notes on a pad in front of him. He took pride in accuracy.

I prefer to think of history as a chronological record of events, including an explanation of or commentary on those events. That part of my journey that I shared with Daddy King at our first meeting began in Savannah, Georgia, on December 23, 1953, three months following the birth of my oldest son and shortly after opening my first law office in the Savannah Bank Building, at the corner of Bryan and Bull streets, one block from City Hall. I recalled that it was a cold day, around 1 p.m., lunch time. Proceeding towards Morrison's Cafeteria, I witnessed the most upsetting event: a young black man being dragged by his heels, feet first, out of the cafeteria by several white men, and ordered never to return under threat of jail for trespass and causing a public disturbance. That man was Savannah native Hosea Williams, who later became one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s lieutenants in the civil rights movement; that indelible impression of Hosea being roused out of Morrison's remains with me to this day.

Daddy King interrupted me to interject, "Hosea Williams...I've known him since he moved to Atlanta...the Southern Christian Leadership Conference...had some problems with the NAACP...I recall he led the integration of the passenger train Nancy Hanks, that ran from Savannah to Atlanta, sometime around 1957...Hosea's slogan is

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‘Unbought and Unbossed.’”

I continued: “Many people regard Hosea as a trouble maker, but few of them realize that he is an educated man with a degree in Chemistry from Morris Brown and a Masters from Atlanta University. Many of these same people are unaware that Hosea enlisted in the army at the onset of World War II, and served in an all-black unit attached to General Patton’s Third Army, where he was wounded in combat. I knew Hosea in the early Sixties, when he was vice president of the Savannah NAACP, under W.W. Law.”

Dad was impressed with my knowledge of Hosea, unaware that I was aware of the fact that Hosea was with Martin when he was assassinated in Memphis. Thereafter, I frequently ran into Hosea as he established his “Feed the Hungry” program during the early Seventies, then entered politics as a Georgia State Representative, from 1974-85, as a member of Atlanta’s council, from 1985-90, and as a Dekalb County Commissioner, from 1990-94.

There weren’t many people in Hosea’s circle who could get a rise out of him as I could whenever I reminded him of a time back in 1970, as my son and I were starting out in the concert business, and Hosea threatened to boycott one of our shows starring Billy Preston, unless we paid him for his “cooperation,” which was Hosea’s code word for promising to make sure that profits from such ventures would be redistributed among Atlanta’s less fortunate.

(HISTORICAL NOTE: *In 1962, Martin Luther King, Jr. declared, “Savannah, Georgia, is the most integrated city south of the Mason-Dixon Line as a direct result of the leadership of Hosea Williams.”*)

The single most important impression I want to leave

the reader with is that history has not paid Martin Luther King, Sr. his due. If the civil rights movement had a father, it was Martin Luther King, Sr., in the same way that he was father to his son: Daddy King trained, lectured and mentored Martin Luther King, Jr. In 1948, MLK Jr. became his father's associate pastor and he developed his ability as a speaker under his father's tutelage. Many folks will tell you: "If you ain't been prayed over by Daddy King, you ain't been prayed over!" And it is clear to me that the apple did not fall far from the tree.

(EDITORIAL NOTE: *It is particularly appropriate here—as the events I am about to reveal are not only true but previously undisclosed—to note that it would take me several hundred pages to completely describe my association of seventeen years with a man whom I believe was an incredibly great, outstanding human being. At this stage of my life I can only leave the vivid, lasting impressions that passing time cannot erase.*)

We talked about our families, especially our sons. Daddy King smiled as he recalled his children and often spoke of his devotion to his wife, "Bunch," which was his pet name for Alberta, shortened from "Honeybunch."

"Did you know that ML (as he referred to Martin Luther King, Jr.) learned to sing at an early age, from his mother? Bunch has been the choir director and organist at Ebenezer for as long as I've been pastor. That was something: ML had a good voice, accompanied his mother on organ. I smile every time I think about it. He was close to his mother. You know, we had it rough in the early days, the Depression days. ML was a child of the Depression."

"That's something we have in common," I interjected.