My Year at Morehouse

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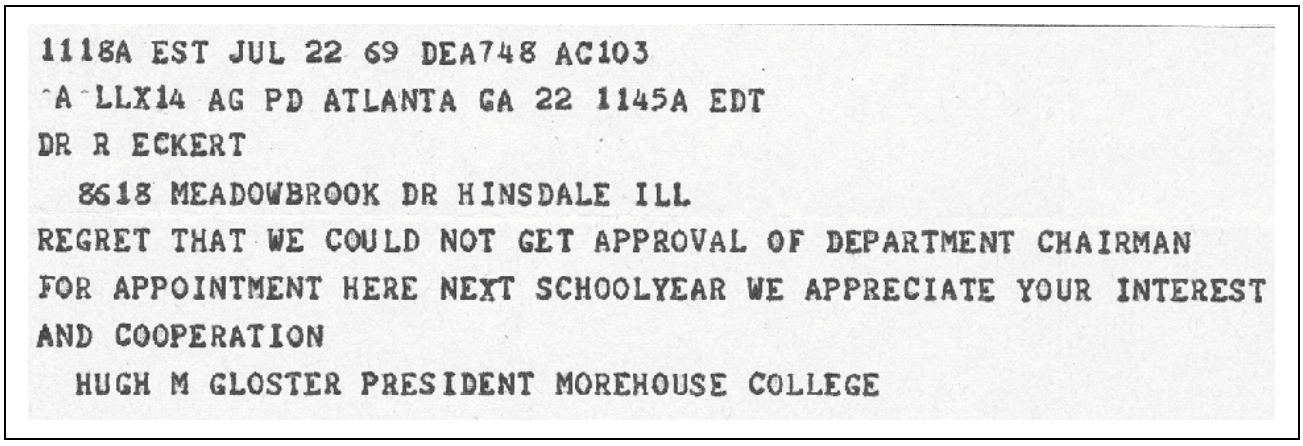
In the summer of 1969, a Morehouse College faculty member, biology professor Dr. John Wagner, received a summer research fellowship at the Argonne National Laboratory outside Chicago. Argonne was a government research institution being run by the University of Chicago for the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission. Although it was primarily a research facility, its university ties provided for a substantial educational orientation, and it was that aspect of its mission that drew the Morehouse professor to Argonne for the summer.

Dr. Wagner carried out his fellowship in the Biological and Medical Research Division, where I had my laboratory as a member of division's scientific staff. However, his field of interest was very different from my own, so we had little contact professionally during his tenure there. And, indeed, we probably would have had little contact at all except that Morehouse needed someone to teach biochemistry and molecular biology as a visiting professor for the next academic year, and I stood out to him as a possible candidate.

I stood out in part, of course, because my academic qualifications and research interests were in those fields, but also because I had been for many years actively involved in the civil rights struggle in the Chicago area. So, with my agreement, Dr. Wagner recommended to the Morehouse College president that I be considered for the visiting professorship. Soon thereafter, President Gloster invited me to visit the campus for an interview.

I have little recollection of that visit to Atlanta, except being attracted to a painting on the wall of Dr. Gloster's office. It showed the merged visages of Jesus, Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr. It made an unforgettable impression on me. Other than that, I don't recall that my interviews at Morehouse were anything but amicable and encouraging, including my visit with Dr. Fred Mapp, chairman of the biology department. So, I was more than a little surprised when I received, a few days after my return home, the following telegram:



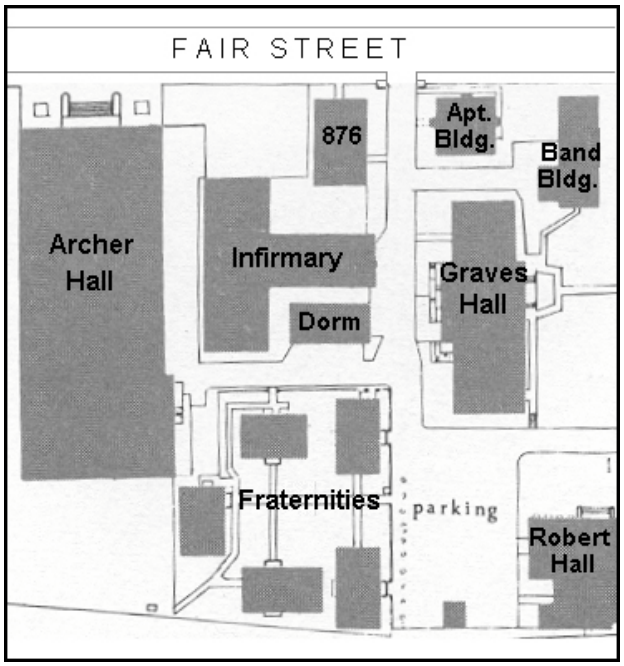
1118A EST JUL 22 69 DEA748 AC103
A LLX14 AG PD ATLANTA GA 22 1145A EDT
DR R ECKERT
8618 MEADOWBROOK DR HINSDALE ILL
REGRET THAT WE COULD NOT GET APPROVAL OF DEPARTMENT CHAIRMAN FOR APPOINTMENT HERE NEXT SCHOOLYEAR WE APPRECIATE YOUR INTEREST AND COOPERATION
HUGH M GLOSTER PRESIDENT MOREHOUSE COLLEGE

I may have been surprised by the telegram, but John Wagner was absolutely incensed when I showed it to him. As it turned out, this episode was the beginning of my personal enlightenment in the matter of infighting among the two permanent members of the Morehouse biology department at that time. As I look back on it now, it is clear that Dr. Mapp's initial rejection had nothing to do with me or my qualifications. It had everything to do with the fact that I had been recommended by Dr. Wagner and, because of that, I was viewed by the department chairman as an potential ally of his nemesis in their ongoing battle for supremacy in the biology department.

None of that was apparent to me at the time and I was willing to accept the message of the telegram at face value. Dr. Wagner, however, was not. I don't know what action he took, but

before another week had passed, I received the appointment and began making plans to move my family to Atlanta, where we would be living for the next academic year on the campus of Morehouse College—and I would begin my one-year tenure as Distinguished Visiting Professor of Biology.

The terms of my appointment included housing provided by the college, a large two-story frame house right at the entrance to the campus at 876 Fair Street. This entryway was more of an alley than a street, and it terminated in a small parking lot about 75 yards to the south. Directly across the alley from our house was a small apartment building housing Morehouse staff, and next to it was the rear of Graves Hall, the main dormitory for the college. South of our house was the infirmary and a single-story student housing unit my sons called "the swimmers' dorm." Adjacent to the parking lot, were five fraternities. Over the next nine months that alley became a stage on which played some unforgettable dramas and comedies, for which our family had front-row accommodations from our kitchen window. A map of that part of the campus is shown below.



In fact, the first drama took place only a few days after we arrived and, as it turned out, I became a key player myself. We were just getting settled in our new home and students were moving into their dorms for the fall term. It was just after dark that evening. My 12-year-old son and I were returning from a visit to my new office in Hope Hall and we had just walked into the alley around the south end of Graves Hall. Suddenly, I heard a sharp crack coming from the direction of the dormitory across the alley and felt a blow on my chin, like I'd been hit by a rock. However, when I got home, I discovered that I had a bleeding wound on my chin, about an inch below my lip. I hadn't been hit by a rock—I'd been shot by a pellet gun. An X-ray later that evening showed that the pellet was still lodged in the tissue of my chin.

It was obvious to me that I was not an intended target of the guy with his finger on the trigger. It was dark and I had only been in view a few seconds before the pellet was fired. Clearly, some kid was just playing around with a pellet gun. However, that didn't keep me from imagining a possible headline in the next morning's Atlanta Constitution: "White Professor Shot on Morehouse Campus." Although no one in the college administration ever asked me not to talk about the shooting, I didn't relish that kind of headline any more than they did and, as far as I

know, it has remained an undocumented event in Morehouse history. However, the students on campus didn't get much sleep that night, as a massive shakedown inspection was ordered by the college president.

My academic responsibilities at the college included teaching biochemistry in the fall term, molecular biology in the spring term and a biology seminar both terms. The appointment also required me to be available for committee assignments, but I don't recall ever having had any. All in all, it was a pretty minimum teaching load, but that was fine with me. I appreciated the opportunity it afforded me to adjust myself and my family to the culture shock of suddenly finding ourselves among the only white folks in an African-American community of a large city in the south.

To my knowledge, the only other Caucasians in our neighborhood were physics professor Sam Neff and his family, who lived in a duplex across Fair Street, and the wife of campus chaplain Bill Guy, who lived with his family in the apartment above the Neffs. In addition, mathematics professor Peter Russell, who was single, lived as a supervisor in Graves Hall. At the time, I was probably better equipped than most mid-westerners to deal with our new environment, but it still took me a while to get used to being the only white guy in the line at the local Dairy Queen.

All of the courses I taught at Morehouse were advanced-level courses, so most of my students were upper-classmen (or women; I had a couple of Spellman and Clark students in my classes). And most, if not all of them, were pre-med majors, which meant that competition for grades was ferocious. The material I taught was not easy, but the better students handled it well and achieved good grades. At the end of the year, I was satisfied that my course objectives had been achieved and, as the following narrative indicates, the students considered me to be fair in my dealing with them. As it also indicates, the same could not be said for their opinions of the two permanent faculty members in the department.

To say that the Morehouse biology majors, on the whole, didn't like or respect their two permanent professors would be putting it rather mildly. In fact, sometime during my year there, a few of them began publishing an underground newsletter castigating the professors and all of the students that tried to curry favor with them. The newsletter, which had no bylines, was reproduced on a ditto machine and carried the title, "THE METAMORPHOSIS (In Hope of Change)." Stamped on each copy in red with a rubber stamp—and in Old English lettering—was: "The Bio-Phantom." I did not know who instigated these inflammatory publications—and I didn't want to know. I was on amicable terms with my two colleagues, and I wanted it to stay that way. However, my name did appear in one of the issues:

Flash!! Dr. Ecker will not return to Morehouse next year. Fired by Dr. Mapp. Flunked administrative course taught by older members of the department. Could not learn to be unfair to students.

Of course, I was not planning to return to Morehouse for the next year, as I had responsibilities awaiting me back at Argonne—but I was happy to know that the students viewed me favorably.

My office and laboratory in Hope Hall were on the first floor. Both of my colleagues were located on the floor above—at opposite ends of the hall—which was reflected in the following two excerpts from the pen of the Bio-Phantom. I have omitted the names of the students who were being skewered by the Phantom.

To _____
You run to the office of Fred and then John
Your cheesing you try to divide
But you best cast your vote one or the other
Before you get shot from both sides

And,

Morehouse promises superb track season with surprise sophomore sprinter. (tip-----_____ has been running up and down the second-floor hall in Hope Hall all semester.)

Because of my location in the building, I was not an observer to a lot of what went on upstairs, so I can't confirm most of the claims made in the newsletter. However, I was able to note that my colleagues did tend to view all biology students as lackeys who were expected to be available at their beck and call. As an example, the post office was in the basement of a building not too far to the west of Hope hall. More than once I observed John Wagner trek the halls of the biology building trying to find a student he could send to get his mail. By the time he finally found one, he had traveled more than the distance to the post office. Yet, he seldom went for his own mail.

Although the biology seminar was only a minor portion of my teaching responsibilities at Morehouse, it provided some of the more interesting memories of my tenure there. At the time, several pressing social and political issues in the national and local arena offered a number of intriguing topics for my students to tackle. At the end of the 1960's, Atlanta was among the more polluted and polluting cities in the country. And, one of the largest hippie communities in the nation could be found at that time up on North Peachtree Street. So, that year in the biology seminars, we took up environmental issues and the use and abuse of drugs—both legal and illegal.

Of course, the counterculture up on North Peachtree wasn't the only place in town to find people who abused alcohol and street drugs. The word was, at least among my sources on the campus, that the use of hard liquor and marijuana was pretty prevalent among the students at Morehouse. Given that, we set out to find out just how prevalent it was—and to assess attitudes among student users concerning their motivations and patterns of use. The seminar students took to this challenge with exceptional enthusiasm. They surveyed 196 students, asking about their usage levels of hard liquor and marijuana. Then they compiled the data into correlation tables to show patterns of combined use. One student, Mr. James Young, tape recorded extensive interviews with eight students and presented a 22-page, hand written transcript to the class.

Yet, as satisfied as I may be about my experience in the classrooms at Morehouse, it may well be that my students benefited most from a simple administrative recommendation I made related to how one of my courses was listed in the course catalog. At that time, medical schools required pre-med students to include a full year of physics in their course work. At Morehouse, general physics was taught in only one semester. The second semester of first-year physics was a course in mechanics intended essentially for physical science majors, a course with little real benefit for pre-med students and an unnecessary diversion from more essential course work.

When I discovered that, I suggested an alternative to that second-semester physics requirement that could satisfy everyone involved. In my molecular biology course—to be taught in the second semester—I intended to include a significant amount of material on the subject of

biophysics. In fact, one of the texts I planned to use was titled, "Molecular Biophysics." So I went to see Jim Mayo, chairman of the physics department, and suggested that we re-name my course "Molecular Biology and Biophysics, " and make it available for credit in either Physics or Biology. He agreed and my students breathed a sigh of relief, as they could now take the course for physics credit and avoid that dreaded course in mechanics.

Although I remained on good terms with both of my biology department colleagues throughout the year I was there, I had little contact with them outside our normal departmental interactions. Most of my efforts for staying current in the sciences were carried on next door in the chemistry department, with Joe Gayle and Charlie Merideth—or with some of the guys in biology and chemistry at Atlanta University. Socially, I didn't interact with very many of the faculty, because most did not live anywhere near the campus. John Wagner graciously invited us to his home on several occasions during the year and Fred Mapp invited my wife and me for dinner once. As it turns out, that evening was a highlight of our year at Morehouse.

Another guest at dinner that evening was Benjamin Mays. Dr. Mays had retired as Morehouse president a couple of years earlier, so he was no longer the fixture on campus he had been for so many years. If it had not been for that shared dinner at the Mapp's home, I may never have had the opportunity to meet the man who had done so much to make Morehouse the quality institution it had become. Not only that, he liked to play pool, and Fred had a pool table in his basement. So, Dr. Mays and I played pool. I don't remember who won, but I do recall that it was a most delightful evening.

Meanwhile, over at 876 Fair Street, our family had settled into the neighborhood—or, at least, as settled as the neighborhood allowed. When the majority of your neighbors are energetic young college guys, peace and quite are rare commodities much of the time. Fortunately, my wife and I occupied a bedroom at the opposite end of the house from Graves Hall and our kids, like most kids, could sleep through almost anything. However, our master bedroom accommodations overlooking Fair Street and Archer Hall did turn out to be a bit of a inconvenience one night while we were there. It was around one or two o'clock in the morning. The operator of a car parked on Fair Street just down from our house began an incessant honking of his horn, apparently attempting to attract the attention of somebody down in one of the fraternities. However, no one appeared—and the honking continued. Now wide awake, we waited to for the honker to give up…but he didn't. There would be occasional pauses, when our hopes for the return of peace and quite were temporarily restored. Then it would begin again.

Finally, my wife hopped out of bed without uttering a word, grabbed her robe and slippers, tromped down the stairs and out the front door. In disbelief, I jumped to the window and watched as she marched down the street and over to the car. I can only imagine what she said to that guy—or his shock at being suddenly confronted by a middle-aged white woman in a bathrobe shaking her finger in his face, as only a mother can do it. Whatever she said, it produced the desired result and he drove off. However, he was back in a short time and the honking resumed—but only briefly. Either his original mission was accomplished or, more likely, he did not relish another encounter with the specter in the blue bathrobe.

Graves Hall, across the alley from our house, had a rear entrance to a basement office where Mr. Whatley, the plant engineer and coordinator of security, could be found at most times during the day. With the proximity of his office to our home, and his friendly disposition, it was probably inevitable that Waldo Whatley would become a friend of our family. He had granddaughters about the same age as my two youngest daughters. So, he enjoyed bringing his

granddaughters to the campus where they could play with our girls—or sometimes take them all over to his house to play. The girls, now in their forties, still remember Mr. Whatley fondly.

The other inhabitant of that office in the basement of Graves Hall was the night security guard, whom we also got to know pretty well. On most evenings in good weather, he could be found sitting on a chair outside the office door. He was a likable fellow and we enjoyed some interesting conversations over the months we were neighbors. I'm sure he welcomed these visits as opportunities for diversion from the tedium of a mostly boring job. I say "mostly" because that tedium could be interrupted occasionally by the antics of mischievous Morehouse students who frequented the alley.

During the early months of our stay there, most of those antics were relatively tame and Mr. Birdshear (not sure of the spelling) usually handled them peacefully. He carried a pistol, but I never saw it un-holstered. Regrettably, on at least one occasion, the same could not be said of the pistol carried by the man who occasionally substituted for Mr. Birdshear on his days off. On that particular night, it was fairly late and we were still up when we heard the sound of a pistol shot outside our back door. By the time we got to the door, we could see in the light of the street lamp the substitute guard with his pistol pointed at a very angry student. Apparently, he had fired the weapon into the ground to let the student know he meant business. The standoff soon ended as a crowd of students began to gather and the guard withdrew to the office.

Perhaps the antics on the alley would have remained relatively harmless if, over time, parking on the campus had not grown to become a major problem. We had a space for our car directly across from our back door, between Graves Hall and the faculty apartment building. One of the residents of that building used the space next to ours. However, the administration determined that parking should not be allowed in those spaces. Instead, we were assigned parking space in the lot at the end of the alley. In fact, that lot was to become parking for permit holders only. You can imagine how the students—particularly the fraternity members—received this bit of news.

To enforce the parking restriction, an electronically controlled gate was constructed just down the alley from our walkway. To gain access to the restricted parking, each of us was issued a card with a code that could be read at a post up the alley from the gate. Those who possessed such a card could use it to open the gate and gain access to the coveted parking spaces in the lot. Others had to find their parking elsewhere. Thus began some of the more serious antics in the drama on the alley.

To say that the students didn't like that gate would be the understatement of the century. They had had unimpeded transit up and down that alley since the day they first arrived on the campus. Now the gate divided their world into one with "haves" and "have-nots"—and they were the "have-nots" The faculty became the privileged class in the matter of campus parking and, regrettably, our family lived where we stood out as a constant reminder of that reality. Two incidents involving our family demonstrated the antipathy the situation had created among the students.

The first involved my wife and our 14-year-old daughter. Our car was usually parked in a space directly facing the fraternities. One afternoon my wife parked the car there after picking up Susan from school, and when they exited the car, they were subjected to crude and insulting comments from some students who were gathered in front of the fraternities. As might be expected, word of the incident spread quickly around the campus. Later that evening, the president of the student body came to our house to apologize on behalf of all Morehouse students. The second casualty was the family station wagon itself—or at least a couple of its tires, which we found slashed one morning soon after the gate was installed.

The gate was of simple construction—just a wooden one-by-four about eight feet long. The lift mechanism probably couldn't handle a much more substantial gate—and probably the college authorities didn't think a more substantial one was required. Obviously, they underestimated the ingenuity and determination of their students. We watched that ingenuity play out from our kitchen window after the students figured out the mechanism by which cars leaving the lot opened the gate as they drove out. A metal detector had been embedded in the asphalt surface of the alley, perhaps twenty feet down from the gate. When a car leaving the lot drove over that detector, it sent a signal to open the gate. In no time at all, some enterprising students came up with a strategy to beat the system. A couple of them would drive their car up to the gate and stop. The passenger would get out, collect a metal garbage can and place it over the metal detector till the gate opened and his partner could drive through.

Soon, however, the sensitivity of the metal detector was changed so that it needed more than a garbage can to trigger it. Thereafter, I would often come out the back door of our house in the morning and find the gate completely missing. Well, actually, not completely. Usually a stub of wood remained after a student had just driven a car through the flimsy gate. Once, in fact, I watched one student as he tore up the alley on foot and crashed through the gate like he was crossing the finish line of a race.

Perhaps the most unusual drama on the alley didn't involve a Morehouse student, but it did involve a car from the lot down the alley. It was fairly early in the morning when we heard a tremendous crash outside our back door…and then another…and then another. When we got to the door, we could see an already smashed up car being driven by someone who could barely see over the dashboard. He was obviously trying to drive the car out of the alley but was being inhibited by two stark realities: first, poor visibility; and second, he didn't know how to drive. Some kid had stolen a car from the parking lot and was trying, very unsuccessfully, to make a getaway. He had already run into several obstacles—fortunately all on the other side of the alley from our house—and was now trying to find his way to Fair Street through the gateway to the alley. That gateway was bounded by two large brick pillars about six feet high, each topped by a large concrete ball. Every time he tried to escape, however, he kept running into the east-most pillar, ultimately dislodging the concrete ball and sending in careening into the street. Finally, he found his way through the gateway and took off to the east, sideswiping an occasional parked car as he went. We learned later that he had crashed into a car a few blocks down the street, and took off on foot.

Interestingly, my closest friend on the faculty was not in science—he was the Morehouse band director, Ted McDaniel. Ted and his wife were among our nearest neighbors on the campus. They lived just across Fair Street in one of several faculty duplexes located there. His office was also close by. The band building was just behind the apartment building, across the alley from our house. I don't recall how Ted and I first connected, but we did, and I became one of the biggest band boosters on the faculty. So, when the Morehouse band had the opportunity

that year to travel to Washington, DC, to play at a football game vs. Howard University, Ted invited me to go along as one of the staff supervisors.

One thing I could be sure of. If being staff supervisor meant getting tough with unruly band members, I didn't have to worry. It wasn't that the band members couldn't become unruly—or that I couldn't be tough. It was simply that Ted McDaniel—no more than 150 pounds soaking wet—didn't need me to become an enforcer. He could have the most hulking band member quaking in his boots with just a few well-chosen words. Ted and I were roommates at the motel in Washington and, not unexpectedly, we had to deal with some disciplinary situations. But I never had to say a word. Ted could always restore order quickly and decisively.

One of the most enduring memories of my friendship with Ted McDaniel was his ongoing instance that we have lunch together some time over at Donn Clendenon's club a few block's north of the campus. At the time, club owner and Morehouse alumnus Donn Clendenon was first-baseman for the New York "Amazin' Mets" baseball team and a major celebrity on the campus. In fact, I would have been delighted to go to Clendenon's place for lunch…but I never went. The reason was the menu Ted insisted we had to share when we went—a plate of chitterlings and a "Big Red" (his code word for a bottle of strawberry soda). I have always felt a little guilty about denying my friend the opportunity of seeing me consume a plate of chitterlings…but only a little.

Another memorable episode in our friendship came about one evening at his apartment. I was there having a beer with Ted and another neighbor—the husband of a Morehouse staff member. I sat there entranced as these two guys engaged in an extensive debate about the best way to make catfish stew. I'm not a fish eater so I don't recall anything about their respective recipes—but I will always remember the spirited debate.

When I arrived on the Morehouse campus in 1969, the nation was experiencing a level of social ferment that was probably unparalleled in recent history. The memory of Dr. King's funeral on the campus the year before was still very much alive in American consciousness and opposition to the Vietnam War was growing in intensity by the day. So, even if I had wanted to, it would have been virtually impossible for me to find refuge in my academic ivory tower and ignore what was going on around me. In those days, civil-rights and anti-war marches were common happenings in most big cities. I had been involved in a couple in Chicago, and I was in at least one in Atlanta while I was there. That one featured several nationally-prominent figures and ended with a rally on the Morehouse campus. This composite photograph shows some of the marchers as they passed by our house on Fair Street. Seen along with the protesters in this

photograph are my two youngest daughters, sitting atop the gateway pillar in our yard. In the lower frame can be seen the infamous concrete ball that the car-thief had dislodged from that pillar and, across Fair Street, the faculty duplex occupied by the Neffs and the Guys.

After I accepted the position at Morehouse, I was certainly aware that our family was in for some significant cross-cultural experiences—some of which I have attempted to describe here. However, I hadn't anticipated living a short walk from opportunities for such a broad range of cultural enlightenment as the college afforded that year. We saw African dance ensembles and drum ensembles and enchanting vocal groups as they visited the campus as parts of an artist series. And, I still remember walking next door to Archer Hall to listen to the Count Basie band as they performed on the stage there. In addition, our background in the Lutheran Church had invested us with a keen appreciation for a capella choir music, so performances by Dr. Wendell Whalum's Morehouse College Glee Club were never missed.

Finally, no story about the Morehouse neighborhood at the end of the 1960s would be complete without some mention of Aaronoff's grocery store, just across Ashby Street from the practice field next to Archer Hall. (Ashby Street has since been renamed for Joseph Lowrey.) Aaronoff's was a typical neighborhood grocery and, although the proprietors were Jewish, their merchandizing reflected the realities of their clientele. Frequently, large-lettered signs would appear in their window announcing a sale on chitterlings or other food items popular in the local culture. I was not in the store very often, but my wife, like most neighborhood homemakers, would go there frequently for needed sundries. Once, she arrived just as the place was being robbed. Fortunately, the episode ended without violence.

After we returned from our year at Morehouse, I harbored some regrets that I had accepted the position—not at all from my own perspective, but from the perspective of my five children, who had been yanked out of their familiar surroundings without consultation and thrust into a new environment to which, like it or not, they were required to adjust. However, if you talk to any of them today, not a one will speak of it in anything but favorable terms.

In some respects, it was an even greater adjustment for me than it was for them. I was brought up as a racist in rural Iowa in the 1930s and 40s. With my experiences in the military and my involvement in the civil rights struggle, I thought that I had gotten past my upbringing by the time I got to Morehouse. Yet, it took me almost a semester before I could see just students in my classes and not "black" students. In many ways, I learned as much from them as they learned from me.