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The miracle in the mountains

It has been 77 years since Martha Berry was buried next to the college chapel, and yet her presence on campus remains strong. How is it that her ideas and actions continue to inspire when few other founders of peer colleges have had such lasting visibility?

First and foremost, Martha had a vision – of what could be, and so should be, and thus must be. She had eyes for the poverty and despair close at hand, and she turned away from personal aspirations and contentment in order to create a place of opportunity for others. Comfortable conversing with both wary mountainfolk on the backroads of Appalachia and people of privilege in the finest drawing rooms, she had a gift for seeing the potential in others and bringing out their best.

According to one description, this was one of her arts: “You rose to the occasion because she wanted you, willed you, to it.” Such was the effect she had on Henry Ford, the richest industrialist and entrepreneur of that day. According to Pulitzer Prize-winning editor Ralph McGill, it was at Berry that Ford “somehow found ways to express best, and with most enjoyment, his gentle and humane qualities and instincts.”

Martha’s story has been told in multiple biographies, the most popular of which is *Miracle in the Mountains*, by Harnett Kane with Inez Henry (21H). First published in 1956, this account was reissued in 2002 but

now is out of print. Because we continue to receive requests for copies, the college has decided to reprint the book, adding relevant photographs to various sections.

To be clear, this is not a professional biography. Written more than a decade after her death, it is based on firsthand research and interviews with a number of Martha’s contemporaries, but it is certainly fictionalized. Some of the stories may well be truer in spirit than in fact. Still, these stories capture the essence of Martha’s resourceful and intrepid spirit, and they point to the nature of the “miracle” that occurred in the mountains.

The biography reminds us of the qualities and values that first defined the Berry Schools and remain central to Berry College’s mission today. Martha cared about the character of her students, and she believed responsibility was the backbone of character. She meant for Berry to be a community that thrived in its interdependence, with individuals discovering the best in themselves as they brought out the best in others – intellectually, practically and relationally. In her mind, Berry was given in trust, and every member of the community was responsible to steward that trust:

to care for one another, to keep the campus beautiful, to contribute to a particular area of work, and to run willingly toward a problem in someone else’s area when needed.

These are the themes woven throughout the book, and they find their roots in Martha’s own mindset and life’s work.

MARTHA’S CALLING

Kane tells a pivotal story about Martha immersing herself in a troubling and unfamiliar world shortly after the death of her father. Martha spent part of a summer with her friend, Emma, visiting the secluded homesteads of mountain folks and experiencing firsthand their generational poverty and hopelessness. Weeks later, Emma chose those very life circumstances, with tragic consequences.

Forever moved by these experiences, Martha came to believe that education was the only path out for children born into this cycle of poverty. For several years she labored to establish a handful of day schools, but with time, she understood that a more intense form of educational intervention was needed to provide a true gate of opportunity.

She envisioned an education that would give rise not only to a better life for individual students but also to healthy and prosperous communities. That insight led her to create a residential school, a community that could shape character as much as intellectual development and work skills. Such a community would serve both as a fertile medium in which students could thrive and as a model for them to emulate later in their lives.



In this sense, Martha's aim was to educate and improve individual students in order that she might establish a new generation of healthy families and communities throughout the region.

MARTHA'S SINGLE-MINDEDNESS

Call it what you will – stubbornness or determination – but Berry's very existence is the result of Martha's tenacity. Ignoring the strenuous objections of her brother-in-law, Judge Moses Wright, she deeded away her land inheritance to start the schools. She launched the residential program despite the pessimistic reservations of her good friend and chief teacher, Elizabeth Brewster. She ignored a unanimous negative vote by her board of trustees and opened the school for girls in 1909 when funding for the nascent boys' school was still precarious. Later on, in the Depression years, Martha continued to admit students without adequate funds to support them. One of her trustees, married to one of Martha's strongest supporters, suggested pointedly that she be more prudent if she wanted to continue receiving gifts from the couple. According to Kane, Martha calmly replied, "I will keep on opening the gates wider for boys and girls who need it so desperately, even if I must lose the backing of some of my best friends." The couple renewed their support.

MARTHA'S GENEROSITY OF SPIRIT

From an early age, Martha's father noticed that she had "giving hands," and he sought to guide her toward the kind of giving that would transform people: "How to give the wise way – that's the question. If you simply hand things to somebody you destroy his pride, and when you do that you destroy him. Let him take charity and he comes to expect charity. ... But if you lend him seed and tools and let him make his own crop, he'll keep

his self-respect." How best to help those with need remains a contentious issue to this day.

Martha absorbed her father's mindset, and it became the tenet of her life's work and a founding value for Berry. When confronted with true need, no matter how dire, she felt an urgency to act and a confidence that something could be done. "My simple desire to do something ... became a determined resolution to devote my entire time and means to teaching [students] a way to help themselves."

MARTHA'S EXPECTATIONS

Not surprisingly, then, Martha's cardinal principle for her schools was that everyone must work. At heart, it was not a matter of finances. It was an ethic about how to improve the world, starting at your own doorstep. "We all work for one another here, and that's the basis of the schools."

This was the lesson that would extend far beyond the Berry campus. Kane tells the story of Carrie, who worked in a destitute community with little but a ramshackle school. Carrie had learned from Martha to work for a higher Master and higher pay than her salary check. She bought a stove out of her meager pay and organized a community work day. "The school needed furniture, and so I made those things. I learned at Berry to take what I had and make what I need." This intrepid spirit is what Martha hoped for from an education of the head, heart and hands.

MARTHA'S WELLSPRING

Martha's vision and life's work were deeply rooted in her own faith, and she located her own work within a larger story. She kept a sign on her desk, "Prayer changes things."

She also embraced humility. When the boys early on refused to wash clothes on the grounds that "we don' do no women's work,"

Martha offered them a seat in the shade while she set to scrubbing and splashing. They soon had a change of heart.

She was not afraid of doing the hard things and saw value in that for others. When she had a special interest in a student, she would find a way to give that person a tough challenge. For Martha, "The pursuit of easy things makes us weak. It is the pursuit of the difficult that makes us strong."

MARTHA'S HOPE

Toward the end of her life, Martha expressed concern about the mission of Berry. She knew things would change necessarily but was resolute regarding its enduring values. She told the chair of the board: "My fear isn't death, but that people, perhaps well-meaning ones, may try to make just another school out of Berry. I'd rather see the doors close." She founded the schools to be different, and her prayer was to keep Berry as Berry.

What, then, was the miracle in the mountains? Perhaps it was the life-altering experience of a young woman daring enough to venture down remote highland paths. Or maybe it was Martha's willingness to put aside her own rights and privileges to provide a way forward in the world for the 10,000 youth who attended Berry in her lifetime. Then again, perhaps the real miracle is how one person's selflessness was multiplied beyond measure in the lives of those 10,000 individuals who ventured from Berry to improve the places where they lived and worked, to say nothing of the many thousands more who have continued to follow.

Martha conveyed her vision of what could be, and so should be, and thus must be in the form of a simple directive for life that defines the heart of Berry to this day: "Not to be ministered unto, but to minister." **B**