

Self 101: the Art of Coming To...

"Nobody can teach

by Rob Cowles and Sarah Fish
Clarion Reporters

Sam Clark entered the cool auditorium radiating a warm self-confidence. Curiously, the crowd of students watched. Some seemed walled in, while others had come of their own free will, preparing to decipher every word that escaped his mouth. All present were awaiting a sermon. All non-present were also.

Taking the podium, Clark projected an aura of ease, through his mischievous grin that put the audience on the same level. "There was a man who had two sons," he said, "and the younger of them said to his father 'Father, give me the share of the property,' and he divided his living among them." (Luke 15:11)

Contrasting the prodigal son with the dutiful son, Clark compared these opposite characters from the New Testament to the common struggle of freedom and responsibility which a college student faces on his/her journey through acts of initiation.

Clark, the campus chaplain of Oxford College of Emory University, was on campus March 27 and 28 to deliver the 1990 Staley Distinguished Scholar Lecture Series.

Speaking on "Coming to Oneself" and "Breaking Free," Clark said, "Why do we need to initiate ourselves into human life? Identifying with the students, Clark expressed his concerns on this expanding journey, saying, 'Society is harsh, frustrating and always demanding. Sometimes the world is almost eager to forget.'"

Reminiscing on wild days of youth, Clark related some of his most uncomfortable memories: of his "jock" roommate who humiliated him for going to church, liking poetry and listening to classical music. From that do on, Clark gave up many of his hobbies and "began burying parts of myself to try to impress others."

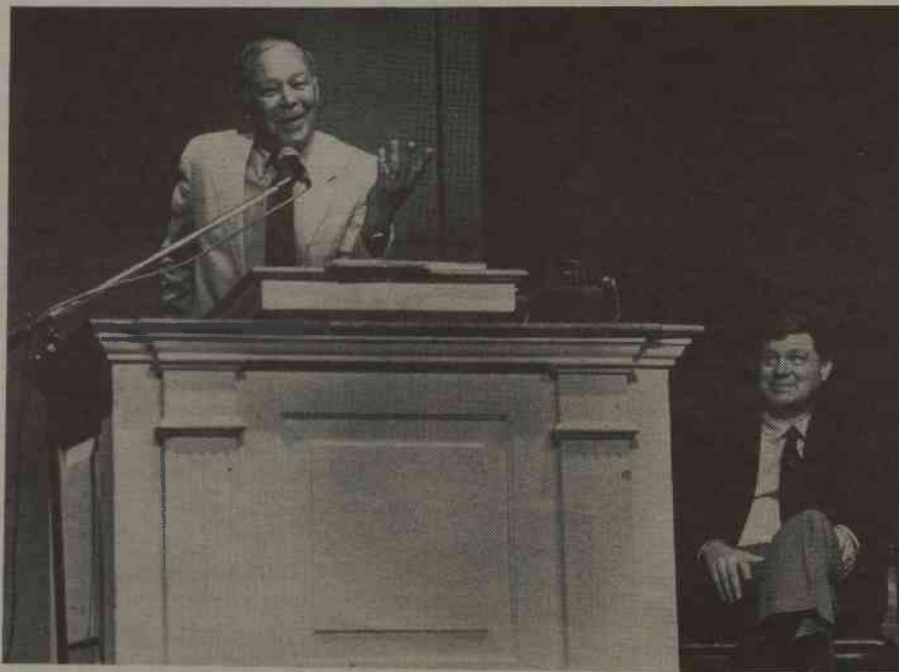
On another occasion, during a fraternity challenge, Clark was forced to find a quarter that was taped under one of the seats in a local movie theatre. Looking back now after being thrown out of theatre twice, Clark asked, "Now, why would anyone go through that -- just to get into a club?"

The freedom he thought he would find in college turned out to be not that at all, but "the oppressing need to be somebody I was not to be."

After all his fraternity parties were a distant chime, Clark said he began to understand and learn from his mistakes, as he said, "It's not how many A's you get or how many beers you drink, but what happens inside."

(Luke 15:17-15:19)

Lightheartedly, Clark wondered out



By the look on BC Chaplain Chuck Zimmerman's face (right) you know he's enjoying the remarks of Staley Lecturer Rev. Sammy Clark of Oxford College of Emory University. (BC photo by Jock Lauterer)

loud at the improbability of offering a college course designed to teach a person how to come to terms with himself. He said this if such a course was offered it would be called "Self 101, the Art of Coming To."

Although Clark's decision to become a minister opened many doors, his lack of experience and need of courage caused him to fall back, hesitating. He didn't know how to inform his friends of his decision, fearing they would say, "What kind of weirdo are you?"

About the same time, a friend of his, Johnny, decided to become a missionary in a foreign land. Upon Johnny's request, Clark calmly prayed with him just as the ship was preparing to depart. As soon as the boat left, Clark headed over to party with fraternity brothers and remembers with a chuckle, "I came back feelin' no pain."

A short time later, Clark got a phone call at 3 a.m. from Johnny's mother. She called to tell him that Johnny had come become crippled with polio. "This just isn't right," Clark recalled thinking.

After Johnny died, and the body was shipped back home, where Clark witnessed the unexpectedly horrible sight of Johnny's crippled corpse in the open casket. "I looked at him all twisted up...and I thought to myself: somehow he's straight and real and I'm all twisted... Johnny was the one who was really free... I knew from then on exactly who I was!"

At Emory University great opportunities arise annually as Clark coordinates an outreach program to help underprivileged people. Clark said he knew he would have his work cut out

for him when, as the work crew left for Mexico, one particular "hell-raiser," Miller, showed up wearing a T-shirt bearing his club nickname, "Miller Time."

After a wild night of partying at a remote, yet festive island club, Miller had to awake to an early day of helping paint an orphanage. Clark told how Pilar, a deaf and dumb 13-year-old girl became attached to Miller during the work session because Miller encouraged her to paint, and was patient with her mistakes. When the project was finished the students left. Later, Miller learned that Pilar didn't understand.

According to a nun Pilar had been waiting on Miller every day, standing in the rain with the paintbrush in her hand. When Miller heard that, he flagged down a taxi to return to her.

Passing up the opportunity to visit exotic beaches or ancient Mexican ruins, Miller decided instead to spend his last free time with Pilar. At the last moment, Miller boarded the plane for home, exclaiming confidently, "She really thinks I'm someone important." Clark said, at that point, "we all had a sense of 'I am who I am.'"

(Luke 15:22-15:24, and Genesis 3:14)

Initiations of courage occur even for ministers. When Clark was still an unordained minister in Atlanta, he was assigned by the church to minister to a convicted murderer on death row.

As Clark approached the jail, he panicked and returned home (Luke 15:29-15:30). Rethinking his duty, Clark returned a little more confident, giving some words of encouragement to Enrique, the criminal. But the convicted

murderer didn't like it, yelling, "Why don't you get your Bible and hit the road."

So he did.

Returning, Clark began exchanging jokes with Enrique. Eventually they grew to like each other. Then, one day, Enrique was gone.

Venturing past the barbed wire fence, entering the prison grounds, Clark walked a few steps and stopped. Among the shuffled, darkened dirt was a cross protruding toward the sky bearing the carved words "Jesus wept."

Suddenly the grim voice of the guard echoed, "Your buddy was executed."

The guard released one last sentence of condemnation: "Jesus was the only one that ever cried for that son-of-bitch."

Reliving that sad moment Clark said never again would he fail to recognize his common bond with all humanity, "It's like a wall broke inside of me."

Another act of initiation occurred as Clark was participating in an campus Outward Bound challenge course. Passing by a group of students trying to climb a 15-foot wall, he noticed how different they all were: boys and girls with various ethnic backgrounds, grade point averages, some with common sense, and some with low amounts of each.

Soon the students discovered the only means of conquering the wall was to realize the "common struggle" that stood in front of them. "This is what initiates one into human life, Clark proclaimed. (Luke 15:31-15:32)

Clark's growing acts of initiation manifested into a judgement call when he was preaching one Sunday. After the service was over, a curious gossip informed Clark that Doc Willis from the church congregation was a high-ranking Ku Klux Klan member. When Clark went to talk to him, Willis coldly replied warning him, "I'd be a little careful 'bout what I said in these parts."

Late one night, Clark received a call from Willis asking Clark to meet him in a sleazy bar on the dangerous side of Atlanta. Reluctantly, Clark met him in the bar and sat down expecting a tiring sermon from this man. Catching Clark off guard, Willis said, "You know, I'm an alcoholic."

The original embarrassment Clark felt entering this low-down bar was instantly changed to the embarrassment of debating on whether to help a person whom he didn't respect. Clark was exasperated. "I was thinking: 'It's not fair! But you've got to do that.' (help people.)"