

June 6, 2000

To the Members of the Primary Source Honorary Tribute Committee:

Dr. John Hope Franklin, as any of his friends and colleagues will tell you, is a great teacher and scholar. During a long and distinguished career, he has amassed an incomparable record of accomplishment, training literally thousands of students, delivering hundreds of public lectures and addresses, researching and writing scores of important articles and books, including one book, From Slavery to Freedom, that has sold more than four million copies. His honors include more than 120 honorary degrees and countless other awards, including the Abraham Lincoln Prize and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In a very real sense, he has lived a large life, overcoming huge obstacles and tackling the most daunting problems of his day—bigotry, racial and economic inequality, political demagoguery, and historical ignorance.

And yet, as impressive as they are, these grand triumphs do not tell the whole story of John Hope Franklin. For me the true measure of the man can be found in the “small” things, the subtleties of kindness and integrity that testify to his uncommon grace and generous spirit. If God is in the details, as Albert Einstein once claimed, John Hope is a vessel of spiritual strength. The right word, the perfect gesture, the determination to acknowledge the overlooked and the unappreciated, the unerring ability to bring balance and harmony to any situation—these are the gifts that set him apart from the rest of us. This mastery of nuance permeates all aspects of his life, from his carefully rendered scholarship to his recent public service as chairman of President Clinton’s national advisory panel on race to the simplest acts of friendship.

It can even be found, I would argue, in his approach to his favorite avocation—the growing of orchids. Take, for example, his special fondness for the Equitant *Oncidium*—one of the smallest of orchids. He loves all orchids, of course, including the flashiest of *Phalaenopses* and *Cattleyas*. But as he makes his way through a greenhouse, he inevitably gravitates to the hanging pots of diminutive but brightly colored Equitants. He is drawn to them, I suspect, in the same way that he is drawn to small children or to neglected figures of the past, as a nurturing friend who gives his closest attention to those who need it most. As he once told me, Equitants, like all orchids, bloom, in part, because they are deprived of water. In fact, the most beautiful blossoms sometimes emerge when a plant is straining on the hydrological margins of life. I like to think that this strange biological truth serves as a metaphor for John Hope himself—a man who turned the challenges of Jim Crow and a hardscrabble Oklahoma boyhood into the raw materials of a creative and fulfilling life. Indeed, the biological equivalent of “marginality breeds creativity” might double as a metaphor for the African-American experience—the saga of cultural endurance and innovation that Dr. Franklin has recounted so eloquently for more than half a century. As we pay tribute to this remarkable man, let us remember the “small” things that have made him what he is.

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