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College of Liberal Arts Honor's Day Program Saturday, April 7, 1990 LBJ Auditorium

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**College of Liberal Arts
Honor's Day Program
Saturday, April 7, 1990
LBJ Auditorium**

Good Morning! I want to thank Dean Standish Meacham for allowing me this rare privilege of addressing you--fellow faculty members, friends of the College, and some of UT's very best students and their parents. Before assuming the position of Dean, Standish served as chairman of the History Department, where I often turned to him for advice. As a faculty member in the College of Liberal Arts, I appreciate the job he has done on behalf of us this year.

What do I say to such bright, obviously very talented young people? For a few minutes I want to remind you that even though your achievements have been outstanding, you have been assisted by others and you have, therefore, an obligation to use your time and talents to make sure other young people are encouraged to strive to be the best that they can be in school and in their lives.

With that thought in mind, my presentation centers around "Sowing and Reaping." Undoubtedly, I could have found a quote from Literature or History to fully capture the essence of what I want to emphasize to you; but I think the words were said best in the Holy Bible, in John, Fourth Chapter, 37th and 38 Verses: I am reading from The Living Bible Paraphrased: "For it is true that one sows and someone else reaps. I sent you to reap where you didn't sow; others did the work, and you received the harvest."

My life exemplifies of how a person can profit from the words and deeds of other people. I am a native of Lexington, Kentucky. In the formative years of my life, during the late 1950s and early 1960s, there were many many restrictions on what people like me could do or even aspire to. "Jim Crow" practices were rampant: local custom prohibited blacks from the free use of downtown accommodations; we attended segregated schools, and were buried in separate cemeteries. I can vividly recall going to Joyland Amusement Park on "Negro Day," which was one day every three months. I remember

wondering, what do white people do in public bathrooms that we don't do, since we could not use them?" In May 1964--the historian in me remembers the exact Month--I went into Walgreen's with a friend and attempted to be served because I had heard that black people could now sit and eat in any restaurant they desired. The waitress said to me, "I am sorry, we do not serve Negroes," to which I replied, "No problem, I don't eat Negroes, I want a hamberger!" I do not say these things out of a sense of bitterness but to point out the reality of American society of that day and that the color of your skin could greatly determine the options available to you.

Yet, when I turned 18, the world was changing: the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., actually made it possible for my future wife and I to receive money to go to College. The University of Kentucky gave me a grant that was renewable each semester as long as I made good grades. I was not smart--after all, I had graduated from high school in the bottom one-third of my class--but I was smart enough to figure out a good deal when I heard one. After completing my B.A. degree, I was awarded a fellowship for my Master's Degree

at UK; then I had a fellowship for my Ph.D, to Duke University, which was worth a considerable sum of money. The graduate advisor at Duke explained that the fellowship was for three years only, and after that I would be on my own financially. All that meant to me was that I had no choice but to do all of the course work, and the research and the writing of my dissertation within the three years. My wife and I (we had gotten married after our sophomore year in college) moved to Durham, North Carolina on July 3, 1974; we moved back to Lexington for me to start teaching on July 11, 1977, and I had the Ph.D. degree in hand. Please do not view this as bragging on my part, but I must admit that I am proud of the fact that (1) I was the first black to receive the Ph.D. degree in History at Duke even though at least nine other Afro-Americans had been admitted to the program before me, and (2) regardless of race, I completed the Ph.D. program in History at Duke quicker than any other student had. So at the age of 27, I was awarded a Ph.D. from Duke--an elite college--and had Universities all over the nation offering me jobs.

Right from the start, my job as a college professor was rewarding in several respects. For one thing, it greatly broadened my world, giving me new horizons on what I could accomplish and what was possible for me. I had always enjoyed reading about what seemed to be "far away places", and lo and behold going to these places no longer seemed impossible but were, in fact a reality. Up until age 26, I had never been on a plane. Last year alone, I must have taken 15 to 20 separate plane trips. I have been all over the United States. I have even been to Alaska, which is as far north, west, and east that a person can go and still remain in the United States. My wife and I took a 12 hour train ride from Anchorage to Fairbanks that is hard to describe. I traveled to Europe on three different occasions in the 1980s, seeing some of the truly great places: I have been in the Cathedral of Notre Dame and Versailles; I stood at the Berlin Wall when East Germans were prohibited from traveling to the West; I have toured Vatican City and St. Peter's Basilica; my wife and I have ventured to Northern Africa, and have seen with our own eyes one of the truly remarkable accomplishments

of mankind: the Great Pyramids of Egypt. In fact, this very week, I have just returned from Germany and what used to be the Berlin Wall.

I point out these aspects of my life, not to be boastful but to show you just how fortunate I--a black American--have been. Over the years, when experiencing these wonderful trips and other activities, instead of being in a jovial mood entirely, I often become melancholy and say, "is this really happening to me?" I keep remembering that early in my life, I just did not know that these kinds of things could happen to someone like me. Also, taking some of the joy out of the really wonderful things that have come my way is the reality of knowing that far too many black people back home in Lexington have never had any of these opportunities, and if I were to say the same things to them that I have just shared with you, they would simply not believe me, they would say that I am fabricating my life to impress them.

You see, honor students, one of the real challenges that you face in life is to eradicate the last vestiges of racial oppression and to find positive ways to help the victims of racism acquire the confidence

to believe that they can make something of their lives. These black people, who have no conception of the life that I have enjoyed, or indeed, have no idea of what an education can do for them, suffer from what I call "poverty of the spirit." In short, they believe that in America good things are reserved for white people only. Yet, I do not want to be too harsh on my black brothers and sisters, for in spite of all the simply wonderful opportunities that have come my way, to a certain degree, I too remain scarred by my past. Though there is no bitterness in my heart as a result of the racial segregation of my youth, the racism I encountered back then has made me never take certain things in our society for granted. Almost every time my wife and I go out to dinner at a nice restaurant, I say to her, "What did they think we would do in here but eat?"

Yet, there is one very positive result of having experienced racial discrimination in my life. It has made me extremely sensitive to the plight of all people for I know what it feels like to be denied admission to a group or to some activity. Exactly 20 years ago, I took a vow to never join any organization or be involved in an event that

places restrictions on who can participate. In other words, I cannot be a member in an all black or all male club. The activities I participate in are open to everybody! Believe me, this view of mine has often clashed with the attitude of some whites, and significantly, some blacks as well, who believe because they have been discriminated against and are often in the minority, they have a right to limit the membership of certain organizations to Afro-Americans only. In contrast to this view, I firmly believe that we above all people cannot exclude others from our activities, for unlike some people of the majority group, we clearly know what it feels like to be prohibited from joining a group or club based on something we have no control over.

When I first became a college professor, I was surprised that it was not fashionable to mention something that has a lot to do with my being where I am today: that God has blessed me. I don't know about you, but every once in a while I am talking to someone who I so want to impress that I am almost tempted to make statements about myself that are not true. In response to the question, "How did I get to where I

am?" or "What enabled me to write books or become a professor," I want to say that I am highly motivated and work extremely hard. I really wish I could say that I am smart. In short, that I have reaped what I have sowed. To be sure, I work hard, but so have countless other people. When I first began to interact with my colleagues at UK (and the same was true here at UT) I was amazed that they consistently attributed their accomplishments solely to being highly motivated, or inquisitive, or intellectually gifted. Yet, I have always known the reason why I have been successful: I have not accomplished anything in my life that God was not a part of. I have written three books; yet when I started each of them, I asked God to give me the ability and the motivation to do the work. After I finished each book, I thanked him for allowing me to work to the best of my ability. In other words, honor students, though I am not trying to lessen your accomplishments, I hope you agree with me that in part you have been successful because of your God, of external factors that you have no control over. If you agree with me about this, then

you have an obligation to use your talents to assist other people, just as you have been helped.

As I look back on my life, at every crucial point I have met someone who has given me encouragement, or sound advice, or whatever else I seemed to need at that time to get over the next hurdle. This first started at the all-black schools I attended from grades K-8. As a young boy, I was always in trouble at school and adults were constantly calling my mother telling her about the latest thing I had done at the park or in our neighborhood. I eventually noticed that some of my teachers seemed to be especially hard on me, that they often allowed other students to get away with misbehavior or poor work that I was called to task over. At a very low moment in the eighth grade I asked one of my teachers, Mrs. Mary Roach, why do all of my teachers dislike me so? She said that they realized I had potential, that on the few occasions when I was not being disruptive but actually taking part in class activities, I exhibited real ability, and that I could make something of my life. The only thing stopping me from being something, she emphatically said, was me.

Mrs. Roach explained that beginning the very next school year, I would be attending an all white school and I needed to be prepared for what I would encounter, namely that some of my teachers might not demand the very best from me. As fate would have it, when I was in the 11th grade I told my American History teacher that I wanted to be a History teacher just like him. I will never forget his reply. I lacked the intelligence to graduate from college and become a teacher he said. I should join the Army or get a job on the assembly line at IBM. Please do not misunderstand me, enlisting in the Army or working at IBM can in fact lead to very meaningful lines. But, I knew his comments were designed as a "put-down," to remind me that I had a place in life from which I really could not expect to grow from. Though I was angry I refused to buy into his negative assessment of me. Why? because the words of Mrs. Roach were still in my mind and thoughts: that I could be anything I wanted to be. She and the other black teachers at the "supposedly inferior black schools," most definitely planted some seeds that I have sowed.

As a student at UK and Duke, I met a number of professors who are responsible for my being here today. I would not think of making an important career decision without first contacting Steven Channing, a person I first encountered in a Southern History class. It was Steve who asked me, when I told him I was going to go to Law School, if that was what I really wanted to do, to become a lawyer. He said I should do what I wanted to do with my life, understanding the pros and cons of any decision I made. He also helped me understand that I was missing too much of life in my determination to reach my goals as soon as possible. That for some people (and I most surely fall under this category), life can be like riding on a fast train, that you can miss the enjoyment of the ride in the rush to get to the train station.

Upon arriving at UT in September 1980, I was convinced that the History Department had made a mistake in hiring me. Virtually all of the other young professors had already published a book and several scholarly articles. I was certain that I was a plow horse in a department full of thoroughbreds. Several of my senior colleagues--

Mike Hall, Bob Divine, Lew Gould, Bud Lasby, Norman Brown, Richard Graham, Standish Meacham, and Nancy Barker--consistently complimented my teaching, encouraged my research, and wrote letters on my behalf that led to me receiving research and summer grants, a year's paid leave to Harvard University, and above all they gave me the confidence that I could make it here in the History Department.

That I am being allowed to speak on the same occasion when Bob King is being honored is very special to me. After I had been here for several years, it dawned on me that though I often went to talk to Bob about specific needs, i.e. a computer, money for speakers, I was acquiring a wealth of knowledge from my conversations with him. Without question, Bob King has taught me many different things about how a University operates, and about life in general. Furthermore, starting this past September, he and I began having a standing lunch date every Wednesday unless one of us is out of town. The only rule is that we will not talk "shop." But you have to know me

that I cheat a little anyway, and constantly "pump" him for information about how a Dean runs a college. If I ever become an administrator, the many practical ideas and suggestions I have received from him most surely will be put in practice. I am now going to let you in on something about Bob King that most of my colleagues do not know: that he is really a "Mr. Softie," and is actually rather shy, and above all, he is modest about his accomplishments. To be sure, as Dean, he often made difficult decisions, but he always did so with the concern of the individual and the good of the College and University in mind. And he often made these decisions from the "heart and not the head," meaning that on many many occasions he gave people a break they really did not deserve. Standish, watch out; the one real hazard of your job is that because you often must make tough decisions it will lead to people having some wild views about you. But my point is clear: Bob King has sown some seeds that I will harvest all of my academic life.

Last year, I had the privilege of being part of a roast of Bob King, and it gave me, in what I hoped as a witty fashion, to say some words

about him. For the occasion I composed a truly bad poem, "Ode to Bob King," and I want to read it to you. After this I am positive Bob King will never want to hear this again.

The roughest, most demanding Dean at the U. of T. is not Yudof, or Sherman, nor Jeffrey, but the man from Mississippi.

He is brutally honest and shoots straight, whether hunting birds or talking to professors, or mere provosts, vice president, or UT's leader, Mr. Bill. In other words, as Muhammad Ali, or someone like that would say, that Dean of ours takes no jive, from you or me or anyone alive. Bob King would make a great referee for he calls them as he sees them without biting his tongue, he tells you when you are wrong, and when you have won.

The more I ponder this man and his style though he might seem frightening there is nothing to fear, because if you are being upfront with him at least you know where you stand. So, after it is all said and done, Bob Dean, or is it Bob King, it all

seems to run together, has not only been my boss but he is my kind of fellow!!!

In short, my professors, colleagues, and Bob King have been generous with the advice and praise they have given me. At some point I came to realize that I would never be able to repay them. These people do not need my assistance; the only way that I can repay them is by doing or giving something to someone else.

I sincerely hope that I have made a difference in the lives of some of the 12,000 students who have taken my classes over the last 10 years. To be sure, I want to enlighten them about "History," but I also want to challenge them to assess the beliefs and prejudices that they bring with them to college. I want my students to know what it feels like to be a minority. They need to say, how do blacks, or Mexican-Americans, or Asians, or Women feel about this issue? Yet I spend an equal amount of time challenging my minority students as well, that they must not wear being "black" on their sleeves, that they must meet other people and expand their world. I tell all of my

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students that the more they interact with and come to know "other people," they will realize that we make far too much out of our differences. The real irony of my interaction with my students is that though I have tried to plant some seeds that they can harvest, I have learned and benefitted as much from them as they have from me!

It goes almost without saying that my job at UT--indeed the fact that I have a Ph.D. degree--is a direct result of the Civil Rights Movement. If the world was truly fair, then the people who protested, marched, and demanded changes would have then been hired at UT and other places. Tragically, however, a great number of the people who most challenged the status quo were unable because of their age, or their lack of education to take advantage of the changing world they help create. It would be a sin for me to not respect and appreciate black senior citizens for they truly labored hard and long for the harvest that young blacks have reaped! There is no Afro-American my age who can truthfully say that she or he have "made it" solely because of their determination, hard work, sacrifice, and ability.

If we have made it at all, it is because we are walking in the footsteps of people who paved the way. In other words, we are reaping what others have sown!

I would argue that even if you are not an Afro-American, you still have benefitted from the good deeds of other people. Think about it, if you are Mexican-American, Jewish, or female, surely your opportunities to attend this institution and have access to certain jobs has increased because of the determination of others to open certain doors. Even white males cannot sit back and say that they have lifted themselves up by their own bootstraps. At the very least, your parents made sacrifices that enabled you to be here. If nothing else, white men have enjoyed the luxury of attending school in an environment that reinforced their significance and accomplishments, and makes them feel comfortable. Therefore, white males have not had to devote their energies to gaining acceptance by their peers. Indeed, they have been "the peers."

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I want to close today by challenging you young people to sow, so that others may reap. There are all sorts of problems in our world today. I hope I do not sound like a politician when I say that one major problem has to be that far too often we look outside of ourselves, maybe to the government or to established institutions and agencies, to change things. When I was your age, I found some consolation in saying that because I was black and young, I was outside of the "system" and was, therefore, free to condemn the "establishment" for the ills of my society. Yet, none of us are outsiders and we--even while we are young--have an obligation to work for meaningful changes. A great lesson that the history of the United States has taught me is that one individual completely dedicated to furthering democracy, to ending some of our problems or ills of society can make a difference if she or he is sincere and can somehow persevere. One of the things that impressed me about Martin Luther King, Jr. and most people I admire is that in many respects they are ordinary human beings who on occasion did something extraordinary! You and I can make a difference. We should all say that the world should

be better because we came this way. Whatever talents we have should be used to help someone. If nothing else, all of us can serve as role models for the young.

I want to thank the Dean and his staff for allowing me to be a part of this program. Congratulations to all of you who are being honored today. You richly deserve praise for what you have accomplished. But I hope you also remember that receiving an award is more than a pat on the back for what you have done. It is a challenge you must strive to live up to every day.