

John Seigenthaler
LBJ Lecture April 27, 2004

UNEDITED

LBJ Distinguished Lecture
Remarks for President Denise Trauth
Alkek Teaching Theater
Tuesday, April 27, 2004
6:30 p.m.

Good evening, and welcome to our spring 2004 Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecture.

It's hard to imagine a more appropriate speaker in a series named for LBJ Both Lyndon Johnson and John Seigenthaler were steeped in civil rights experiences in the South.

Mr. Seigenthaler's resume is replete with these experiences.

In the 1960s he served the U.S. Justice Department as administrative assistant to Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

In that role he was mobbed by Klansmen in Alabama while trying to help the Freedom Riders.

Most of Mr. Seigenthaler's career has been spent in journalism.

After forty-three years with the Tennessean newspaper in Nashville, he retired as editor, publisher and CEO in 1991.

Simultaneously, he served a decade as founding editorial director of U.S.A.

Today.

He is a former president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

In 1991, he founded the First Amendment Center to create a national dialog about First Amendment rights and values.

He hosts a weekly book-review program, chairs the annual Profile in Courage Award selection committee for the John F. Kennedy Library Foundation and co-chairs the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award for the RFK Memorial.

He was asked by former presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford to serve on the National Commission on Federal Election Reform organized after the 2000 presidential election and is a member of the Constitution Project on Liberty and Security created after the 9-11 tragedies.

We are honored and delighted to have John Seigenthaler give our Lyndon Johnson Distinguished Lecture.

Please welcome Mr. Seigenthaler.

John Seigenthaler

Well, it is a great privilege to come to Texas State and a special privilege to be introduced by your distinguished president.

You know I think back over my career, and particularly those days in government and in some ways, it strikes me that I'm not the first person to have come to President Johnson's mind to give this lecture.

As some of you know, you can remember, and others may have read, Attorney General Kennedy whom I served as administrative assistant and then Vice President Johnson, and then President Johnson were not the best of friends. As a matter of fact, shortly after I went to work in the Justice department, I received a call from my friend Walter Jenkins, whom I had met in the campaign of 1960—Walter Jenkins trusted aide of President Johnson—and he said, “John, come over to the White House Mess, we need to talk.”

And so I went over, and at lunch, Walter said, “Now John, you know our two principles should be kept as far apart as is humanly possible. And when they're together, we need to be with them to make sure that nothing said between them gets into the press.”

And so, as journalists by trade, Walter and I entered into this agreement that we would help protect the Vice President, and then President and the Attorney General from doing each other public relations harm.

For my part, President Johnson was unfailingly courteous, and thoughtful, and kind to me and I admired him greatly.

I am too honored to be at Texas State, honored to deliver a lecture on the Civil Rights as part of the series that bears the name of Lyndon Johnson. Honored particularly because in the history of race relations in the United States it was President Johnson's advocacy of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1964 Voting Rights Act, that was an initiative committing this nation to justice to as no action by any other president since Abraham Lincoln had signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

And just last Sunday morning, in the presence of a dozen journalists, aging journalists, limping journalists I sat in an audience at Syracuse University and listened to Congressman John Lewis of Atlanta, a true hero of the movement who said his own recollection of that night, that night in March of 1964, sitting with Dr. Martin Luther King and listening to that address by President Johnson that so dramatically changed our nation, changed his administration's commitment to the cause of equal justice under the law, and John recalled that it was a time of desperation, Kennedy who'd advocated this law was dead. That week, the Reverend James Reeb white civil rights worker who had gone to the South to help in the cause became the latest of the martyrs in the movement to die. That very week preceding, the Selma watch at the Edmund Pettus Bridge had taken place, and a virtual police riot had injured and maimed many before they were imprisoned. Hope for him, for them was dead, and then on that night, Louis and king sat and they heard those powerful words as they came from the president's lips and John said hope came alive.

It's been half a century since John Lewis heard those words, but as he stood before us at Syracuse last Sunday morning, he recited them from memory.

This is what the President said, “At times history and fate meet at a single point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was,” he said, “at Lexington and Concord, so it was,” he said, “at Appomattox a century ago, so it was,” he said, “last week in Selma.”

And then John continued to recite from that speech. Recalling the cheer that came to his eyes and to Martin Luther King's eyes as the president said, “Should we

defeat every enemy and should we double our wealth, and should we conquer the stars, and still be unequal to this task, then we will have failed our people and our nation. What happened in Selma last week," he said, "is part of a larger movement which reaches beyond section and state. It is an effort by American Negroes to secure for themselves the whole blessings of American life. This cause," he said, "must be our cause because it is not just Negroes but really is all of us who must overcome." And then he said, "and we shall overcome."

As John Lewis recited those words Sunday morning fifty years to the month after he first heard them, his voice broke with emotion.

And so, what Lyndon Johnson did lives as his legacy and a legacy to all of us.

I think what the President said about the correlation between my own life and President Johnson's in so far as our understanding of race is concerned, has some relevance to me at least.

What I say tonight will be deeply personal. It will recount for you almost as therapy to me my own course as I moved from one point of view to another. Even as I know President Johnson's trip from the Perdenales to the Potomac took him beyond that realm and to a new understanding of the racial segregation that afflicted his South and my South for so long.

Now I am the son of a segregated racist South and I state it neither as self-condemnation nor as confession, but simply to acknowledge a truly grotesque fact of life in a cursed time and a conflicted place.

Those in this room of younger generations are entitled to wonder why we who were acculturated to that time could not and would not recognize either the conflict or the curse.

And I wonder myself.

From birth through childhood and well into young adulthood, my hometown, Nashville Tennessee was as racially portioned by law, by custom, by white preference as an city in South Africa at the height of Apartheid. Think of any place where a resident of my city, or any city of the South, might need or risk to go, a hospital, a restaurant, a restroom, a hotel, a school, a park, a church, a theater, a train, a bus, or troll, that place was ruled by Jim Crow and a Confederate tradition of enforced separation by race. There was a requirement that every government owned building, every park, and public conveyance post white and colored signs on restrooms and water fountains to "protect community health." Colored to the back, white only, colored only, white men only, Negro men only, white ladies only, black women. African-Americans who ignored those signs risked arrest or verbal or literal slaps, and I have seen both delivered slaps in the face. Those signs silently declared what state law and local ordinance required, and what the United States Supreme Court in Plessey had said was Constitutional.

Think of it, young people, think of it.

How could it have been the land of the free and the home of the brave?

Behind the meaning of those signs was the ingrained Southern certainty that they were inferior and we were superior. To grow up white in the South at that time was to ignore the gross unfairness so starkly visible it was to believe the lie of separate but equal. It was to deny the emotional pain suffered by blacks it was to adopt the myth that racial segregation was permanent, popular, ordained by God, ordained by the

government. It was also to hear everyday that vicious despised, demeaning word from the lips of somebody.

That word was part of my daily discourse.

I encountered it in grade school with classmates and at times from teachers.

My mother told my siblings and me it was common and vulgar and trashy and we would not utter it, but its expungement from our vocabulary was assured by my father's biblical belief that to spare the rod was to spoil the child. The realization that it was alright for my classmates, teachers, even my Aunt Delia, a Dominican nun to speak that word, but wrong for me to do it should have sharpened my psychic sensors to the moral contradictions at the core of our Southern culture. It didn't, at least for a long time.

Though the memories are vague and vagrant some almost seven decades later, several poignant race-related anecdotes survive. I recall, for example, a moment of discovery.

I was perhaps eight or nine when I attended with my mother and my grandmother some Shirley Temple movie at the old Paramount theater on Church Street in Nashville. The movie was over, the house lights came up, and as we left our seats, I glanced towards the chandeliered ceiling above and there high up near the roof, I saw a line of black faces peering down at me. I had known there was a first balcony in the Paramount I went there every Saturday for the Popeye club. But this second balcony was a revelation.

"How did those people get up there?" I asked.

"They have their own private entrance," my mother said as if they were privileged.

Well, in a couple weeks, attending the Popeye Club alone, I investigated and found their own private entrance down an alley off Church Street which led to a narrow three flights of stairs up.

There's a far more disturbing memory from about the same time.

My grandfather, a jovial genial man took me one Sunday afternoon during the rainy season to Broad Street riverfront to view the floodwaters of the Cumberland that had swirled and spilled onto the concrete. We were watching the waters and suddenly his face grim, he touched my shoulder and pointed upward to the towering Woodland Street bridge some 300 yards away.

"I was just about your age," he said, "and I was standing just about here on the sidewalk. My mother had told me there would be trouble, and I was to stay away from downtown. I heard the hollering and shouting and I looked right up there, in the middle of that bridge, and it was a big crowd," he said. "And they had this colored fella with a rope around his neck, and the flung him over the rail, and I could hear his neck snap all the way down here."

"They killed him?" I hoped I had misunderstood.

"Just to be sure he was dead," he said, "they shot him maybe eight or ten times."

"Where were the police?" I asked.

"Some of them shot him," he said.

There is more detail to that story of this slain man, charged with murdering a white merchant, kidnapped from jail and lynched. I cannot be certain that every fact my grandfather told me was exact. I doubt, for example, that from that distance he could have heard the cervical cord crack as the rope wrenched taught. But I have no doubt he thought he heard it. Today, all these years later, I cannot drive up First Avenue from

what is now Riverfront Park toward Memorial Bridge, a newer span, without remembering that ghastly memory of my old grandfather.

I was a bit older when I received my first lesson on slavery from my fifth grade teacher, Sister Florence, a nun.

I supposed she taught me many worthwhile things when I studied under her, but I cannot recall them now.

But I do recollect this paraphrase from her lesson on slavery, “The War between the states,” she told us, “had nothing to do with freeing the slaves. The real cause was economics; the plantations of the South against the industries of the North. And you know,” she said, “the Negroes on the plantation in the South were much better off than the whites in Northern factory jobs.”

I suppose at 11 that made sense to me.

And finally, there is conception of the hundreds of times I sat as a young boy, unmoved and unmoving and watched black women—Nashville’s counterparts of Rosa Parks—struggle, laden with bundles, probably laundry or ironing they were bringing home to work on that night from some white family’s pantry.

I never, never, saw them.

I saw them, but I never, ever saw them as they stumbled toward “their area” in the rear, passing vacant seats reserved for whites.

They had the identical fares as white riders, but should they collapse from exhaustion in a forward seat, there were hostile, disbelieving glares and then the motorman, and I heard him, sternly say, “Alright back there, we’re not going anywhere til you get on back to the back or get off this bus.” And never once did I leave my seat to move forward to ease their journey to the back of the bus.

Black women always worked in our home as domestics, and I had been taught as a child to rise if there was a woman standing on a crowded bus, but somehow it never occurred to me that that was supposed to mean black women, and somehow I know my parents didn’t mean it to be.

For too long it never occurred to me to be shamed by that.

And in that respect, I can only wonder:

Where was my head?

Where was my heart?

Where were the heads and hearts of my parents, and my teachers?

How could they have not taught me what they certainly knew?

Yes, it was the law.

But segregation offended at the very core the most basic Christian teaching.

It made a charade of any pretense of common decency.

How could we have accepted without comment or concern, a way of life that was so cruel, so unjust, so corrupt?

Never did I try to imagine what life was like across that line of segregation.

I should not have had to read Ellison’s *Invisible Man* later to comprehend then.

“I am invisible understand, simply because people refuse to see me,” this is Ellison’s protagonist. “You often doubted you really exist. You wonder if you aren’t simply a phantom.”

I should not have had to read Richard Wright’s *Eight Men* to appreciate the anxiety that was part of starved ambition of an entire race. “Like any other American,”

he wrote, "I dreamed of making money, I dreamed of working for a firm that would allow me to advance until I had reached an important position, and yet I know with that part of my mind whites had given me, that none of my dreams would be possible," and then I would hate myself.

And I should not have had to read James Baldwin too understand that anger that was provoked by the ethos. "To be a Negro in this country," he wrote, "and to be relatively conscience is to be in a rage almost all the time."

I wish looking back I could claim road to Damascus conversion that ripped the scales from my eyes that there had been some startling lesson that cattle prodded my lethargic young senses, or that some thunderbolt sermon from the pulpit had jolted my conscience.

There was one memorable, animating experience from my high school junior year that I am convinced made something of a difference.

A math teacher, for reasons to this day I do not understand, one day in the hall handed me a copy of a book called *The Mind of the South* by W. J. Cash perhaps with a chance of improving my algebra grade, if that was it, it didn't succeed.

I read it and for the first time, there was at least a glimmer of appreciation and comprehension of my Southern culture.

Later, as a Niemen Fellow at Harvard, Professor Tom Pettigrew, a social scientist with Virginia roots gave depth to Cash's thesis. "There are many Souths, but also one South a region dominated by the distinctly separate white classes with a shared quality that blended Romanticism, religious fundamentalism, hedonism, heroism and violence. The threads," he said, "ran together to form the rope with which the common brotherhood of white men controlled African-Americans."

My reading of Cash gave me rationale for the sad and lovely black and white lovely ambiguities that were so much a part of our regional character. More than anything else, stimulated my interest in reading more broadly and questioning more deeply. And by the time I was working as a control tower operator in the Air Force, at MacDill Field Florida, I had to come to grips with the inescapable truth that my city and the South places I loved were scarred by racist legacy.

You know, it was a picture to remember, 6AM reveille. I looked down on the field, on the right-hand side black troops filed from their barracks to meet roll call march off to their mess hall, and at the same time the same scene was taking place across my left as white troops fell out of barracks, filed into roll call marched off to their mess. You know, we were all in the same Air Force, defending the same freedom, the same country, but divided by more than color, divided by the distance of history, by emotional unwillingness to come to grips with what our founders vision was of this country.

Well I had no doubt that these and other random incidences of youth gradually enlightened my interest in at least intellectually considering reality. And by the time I joined the staff of the *Nashville Tennessean* I knew at least the difference between right and wrong, and I knew that this newspaper I was joining had put it's editorial position on the cutting edge of change.

And I was happy to be a part of that staff put together by an editor named Coleman Harwell. For those of you very young these names may mean nothing, but my colleges on that staff included David Halberstam, Tom Wicker, a man named Wallace Westfeldt who produced the nightly news for Brinkley as Wicker and Halberstam were

leading the way at the *New York Times*, and then there was Fred Graham who was with CBS covering the Supreme Court and Richard Harman.

We were an interesting group, young, competitive I suppose but friends still after all these years, not in infrequent contact.

Harwell was a brilliant executive and keep our substantial egos in line with blistering daily memos that critiqued our work and demanded perfection, which we couldn't give him.

When race was an issue, however, and the furor surrounding the Supreme Court's 1954 decision was in the news, this editor made sure our paper was wherever the news was breaking.

And so, we went out from our headquarters across the South giving a picture of the developments so that our readers could understand this budding revolution about to take place.

Last Saturday night, out in College Union our old friend, sat together during this program at Syracuse and acknowledged the reminiscence that the editorials that were published by our papers, our two Southern papers, our two Southern liberal papers in those days hardly were models of journalistic courage—they were at best, moderate modest appeals to reason—and still, they attracted angry attacks from that mass of white readers opposed to change and attracted many cancellations of subscriptions as well.

When violence rocked Little Rock, Montgomery, or Oxford or Birmingham we lead.

My first important article on race violence came in 1954, shortly after the Supreme Court had shocked the South with its decision in *Brown* and I want to take just a moment to recount that experience.

I was a very young white journalist. I had been exposed to very little on the other side of that line of segregation. And one day, my editor assigned me to go to a rural town in west Tennessee called Camden and investigate a murder in which a black sawmill hand, Owen Travis had been stabbed to death by a white cab driver Ernest Cole over an eight dollar cab fare.

It happened late on a Saturday night.

The following Monday, the sheriff appeared before the grand jury, said that he had been called to the scene of this crime, had arrested Cole, had released him on his own recognizance, Cole had told him he had thrown the knife in the river. The grand jury immediately returned a no true bill. Cole's father in law, Alan Elmore, a member of that jury abstained from voting.

Well, it smacked of race-law justice.

I remember the interview of Ty Dobson the white employer of the black victim. He thought of Owen Travis as a decent reliable hardworking man and Dobson's sense of outrage spilled out as he recounted for me that late November in 1953, when Travis had come, knocking on the door, asking for an eight dollar advance in his wages. Dobson, in bed, told him to come to the office on Monday.

He heard a skirmish, by the time he got the front porch, Travis was sprawled in the driveway, stabbed in the heart, his neck broken by the wheels of the cab.

The articles I wrote had an impact, a new grand jury was called, Ernest Cole was indicted and convicted and went to prison.

During that investigation, I spent time inside the black community called Shacktown, of that little town, and for the first time, got a sense, a feel, a smell, a taste of life on the other side of the line of segregation.

You know, it's hard to understand why it took us so long to understand. For some of you too young it may be impossible ever to explain so that you can accept it, and I cannot blame you for that.

Nineteen fifty four, just before I'm assigned to investigate this murder, late the previous year, the Supreme Court says separate but equal is unconstitutional let's desegregate schools with all deliberate speed.

And so my city said sure, we'll do that, and in 1957 three years later, we adopted what's called a stair step plan. This September we will integrate the first grade. And after 12 years, we will have an integrated system.

All deliberate speed indeed.

September 9, 1957, the first step with the first grade was taken, and a street protest shouts, pickets, wild threats, vicious crowds of angry whites mobbed together outside the schools targeted for integration. That night, Hattie Cotton School, where a lone six year old black girl had enrolled was dynamited, blown off its foundation.

Martin Luther King understood so well what many of us could not: mindless violence often produces a byproduct of community abhorrence of violence, and that was the case here. Immediately the school board reversed itself, it put that school back in operation that same year, and the next year desegregated all twelve grades.

And then came the Nashville sit-ins in 1959.

David Halberstam's book *The Children* and John Lewis's book *Walking with the Wind* recount those events, as students from Fisk and Tennessee State, and Meharry Medical College, and American Baptist Seminary found themselves unable to live with the contradiction between the revolutionary rhetoric of their history texts and the racist rhetoric that ruled the segregated community. Under the guidance of James Lawson, a young African-American ministerial student at Vanderbilt Divinity School, these students launched a sit-in movement two weeks after the first sit-ins struck downtown department stores in Greensboro [North] Carolina.

When the sit-ins failed to force down those racial barriers, the black students, joined by their adult parents and supporters, initiated a boycott of all downtown businesses and finally, denial of black purchasing power and the continued pressure of the sit-ins brought about change.

Those lunch counters were integrated. But can you believe that free-standing restaurants took another year of demonstrations and those theaters with their third balcony took still a third year of demonstrations?

You know, I think back to those events and how I came to go to work in the Kennedy administration.

The editor I admired Coleman Howell, was fired late in 1959. His policies were too liberal for our new publisher.

His successor a man named Ed Ball, told at our first staff meeting that it was his conviction that the Associated Press was perfectly capable of telling our readers about racial events happening across the South. And he said, "I believe the students have manipulated you, and therefore news stories about their demonstrations won't make news in *The Tennessean* much anymore. Oh," he said, "if there are massive arrests or if

someone dies, or perhaps is seriously injured, it will find a place in the paper, but our policy is a new policy and I will enforce it.”

Wicker left two months later.

I called Robert Kennedy, whom I had earlier helped in the writing of a book, and I went in August of that year to the Kennedy campaign and then to the government.

Halberstam could not leave for *The New York Times* until January, and Wallace Westfeldt, and David Harwood left immediately afterwards.

During my tenure in the government, part of my duties included civil rights and you heard in the introduction of the events in Montgomery, Alabama.

I had never been knocked unconscious before by a Klansman, or by anybody else. It happened, and because it happened, and because I was representing the Kennedy administration, it made big news. It made big news, and if you look at Halberstam’s book, or John Lewis’s book, or most books on the civil rights movement, you’ll find that incident depicted there.

But I should say that what I did that day in attempting to help two young women freedom riders was hardly an act of courage, it was an act of calculation. I saw an opportunity to get two young women into my car—and almost succeeded. And had we driven away, they would have found refuge in a church nearby as they did after I was injured. And that would have been that.

But, because I was injured, marshals were sent in and Alabama was in turmoil. And hundreds, and then thousands, of people from all over this country came in to join those freedom rides.

The real courage was demonstrated by those children, those young students who faced death. I remember talking to one of the leaders the first night, a group of them had started to take up the ride, and I pleaded with her not to send them to Montgomery, Alabama to continue those rides.

I said, “Young women, you’re out of your mind. I’ve seen the violence that’s been done to the first wave of freedom riders, you’re going to get somebody killed.”

And beautiful young, Diane Nash, a junior at Fisk University, speaking to a ranking official in the Justice Department representing the President of the United States said to me, “Mr. Seigenthaler, they all signed their wills before they left last night.”

She was saying we know we may die, but she said we will not let violence overcome non-violence.

And the hundreds, and then thousands that poured in and went on to Mississippi and some to Parchman Prison until they had filled Parchman Prison, and finally, finally, even the deepest of the deep South understood what Lyndon Johnson said and meant when he had preached those words of the movements anthem “We Shall Overcome.”

You know, I think as I reflect on those times of my own emotion and where I was to where I went and where I have come to be.

We’re a great country.

From 1619 when the first African slaves were thrust onto the continent at Jamestown, the sight of colored pigmentation of human flesh has inflected too many of the majority with a rare virus and too many of us, despite these last fifty years, continue to be amnesiacs.

That’s why I welcome so the opportunity to come today to Texas State in Lyndon Johnson’s name to recount my own personal policy.

We are a great country, I know, and do not demean the great strides in race relations over three-quarters of a century that spans my life.

We are a completely different country, and a better country in so many ways and still we are haunted by the dregs of this bitter poison to the point that we still tolerate racial profiling in many places, pink lining in many places selective law enforcement in many places, police harassment and brutality and voter disenfranchisement in too many places.

And they still mock the founding ideal of justice and equality.

And you know, currently, we face yet another challenge in our society, we think of civil rights and speak of civil rights, we cannot ignore the fact that a new wave of discrimination today exists towards Arab-Americans in our society. Read their websites read the anecdotes of the discrimination they face in communities all across this country, loyal Islamic American citizens, more than seven million in this country, part of an Arab world, and Islamic world of a billion people. We cannot afford to ignore the fact that they are entitled to inalienable rights.

We must protect ourselves always against terrorism and we must recognize that our way of life is seen by many of them abroad as evil, although there are seven million in this country who have embraced our way of life and citizenship.

Whenever I appear on campuses these days almost always the question comes, “well, what has happened to the movement? Where have all the flowers gone? We know injustice still exists and why does nobody seem to care?”

I know that much of what I said tonight will strike many of you as meaningless personal anecdotes and still I ask—those of you still awake—to endure one more, endure just one more of very recent vintage.

My wife, Delores, and I have one son, John Seigenthaler. Some of you may watch him as an anchor on weekend NBC or he’s on four nights a week on CNBC.

John and his wife Kerry have a son, six-year-old Jack Seigenthaler. He’s really John, but for purposes of identification, he’s Jack.

And Jack refers to me as grand, my wife thinks he should refer to her as grander, but he calls her grandelores.

Last Thanksgiving, when Jack was 5, we visited them in their home in Connecticut and when we were there, it was my nightly assignment to read stories to Jack at bedtime. Sometimes it takes two stories to read him to sleep, and sometimes three stories, and occasionally four. And on this evening, Thanksgiving Eve, he hit the sack, and my son John came into the room and said, “Jack, grand, long day, long night, long day tomorrow, one story.”

And we would read, and I read Jack a chapter from Harry Potter, and then he said, “Grand, dad said you could read one story, but he didn’t say you couldn’t tell me another story.”

Jack’s a very bright young man.

I happily entered into this conspiratorial plan, I said, “Jack what story would you like me to tell?”

“Tell me,” he said, “about the time you were hit in the head in Alabama.”

He had heard something of it during a television documentary on the Kennedy years, and his parents had told him to ask me about it—not thinking that he would.

Early in the week, I had taken Jack to kindergarten and had noted that he was in an integrated class. Later that day I had asked his mother, “How is that going?”

She said, “You know, Jack has never raised the question of color with us. One day he will, and we will address it when it happens.”

She had said that to me and still Jack asked me to tell him the story, and I said, “Well, I’ll make it a very quick story Jack,” completely forgetting the rumination of his mother, my daughter in law.

I said, “It was a long time ago when some black people wanted to ride the bus in Alabama, and some very mean, angry, hostile white people were trying to stop them. I tried to help the black people ride the bus. And the white people hurt some of them and they hurt me, but we weren’t hurt bad, we went to the hospital and soon we were okay.”

And I said, “Jack, it’s a story with a happy ending. In the end, everybody was able to ride the bus together.”

I related it just that simply, forgetting that conversation with my daughter in law.

And now after a pause, Jack said to me, “Grand, are you black?”

I tell you, it took my breath away, I could not speak for a moment.

Finally, realizing that I probably had betrayed my daughter-in-law’s wishes, I grasped for an answer, “Jack, it really doesn’t matter, does it?”

And Jack, not really understanding why, agreed.

When I returned home, I wrote Jack a letter that he would read someday, a letter reciting that night of our storytelling, expressing the wish that by the time he’s seventy-five—as I was then seventy-five—it really might not matter.

I stand here today and tell you that the flowers are not gone, the flowers bloom with Jack, and in his parents and young people like them all across the country telling them: color in their minds should not matter.

They bloom in institutions like this one.

They bloom in the offering of a LBJ lecture on civil rights.

They bloom whenever we reach out across lines of race and religion and gender and lifestyle.

And they bloom and give hope to the words of that anthem that Lyndon Johnson embraced that night fifty years ago when he said, “We shall overcome.”

Thank you very much.

Lecture transcribed by Benjamin Hicklin, graduate research assistant 2007-08