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A Tribute to Derrick Bell

*Henry McGee**

That Derrick Bell was an iconic figure in the long march of African-Americans to actual citizenship is without doubt. The memorial service for Professor Bell at Riverside Church in New York City was an eloquent testament to the esteem in which he was held by his many friends, colleagues, and comrades in arms. Persons from every sector of the legal, political, and academic sectors of the American social order all but filled the cavernous space of the cathedral.

Derrick was among the first African-Americans to be appointed to a major university law faculty. Of the six or so professors so hired, most are now retired or near retirement. Yet the breakthrough was the outgrowth of a centuries-long struggle in which Derrick was an important leader, having served as counsel at the prestigious and path-breaking NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Among those in the struggle he was, and remains, greatly esteemed.

And though he was on a first name basis with nearly all of the Civil Rights Movement's leadership, my recollection of Derrick Bell is that he was never so busy that he could not extend a helping hand to a colleague. In my case, for example, in the gap between my graduate studies at Columbia and my appointment at UCLA, Derrick, then Director of the Western Center on Law and Poverty, arranged a research post for me at the Center. And in Cambridge, he once had the kindness to host a reception for me when I was en route to a visiting post in London.

Over the years we remained friends, taking advantage of times we found ourselves at common events, and spending time in one another's homes in Seattle and New York. Derrick was a man of uncommon humility given his accomplishments, an intellectual with heart, and it was always a great pleasure to be in the company of his gently sardonic wit and wisdom.

To the great good fortune of countless law students, Derrick chose the path of legal scholarship and teaching as a career. He was a courageous law practitioner, and he continued displaying great courage and

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integrity in his years as a professor at Harvard, where he was the first person of color to serve as a tenured professor, and as dean of the law school at the University of Oregon. Both positions were marked not only by an outpouring of legal scholarship of which his widely adopted book on civil rights was not only a signal triumph, but also a demonstration of what it means to stand on principle.

At Harvard, as is well known, Derrick put his career in jeopardy by going on strike until Harvard Law School appointed a woman of color to a professorship. His concern for gender equality in legal education was also important at the University of Oregon, where, during his tenure as dean, he fought once again for the hiring of a female professor.

No words or testament, of course, can fully capture the unique and masterful career of Derrick Bell. In closing, I am compelled to make a simple observation and declaration: The brother walked the talk!