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The Washington Post

January 30, 1993, Saturday, Final Edition

SECTION: METRO; PAGE B1; DOROTHY GILLIAM

LENGTH: 682 words

HEADLINE: A Universal Benchmark

SERIES: Occasional

BYLINE: DOROTHY GILLIAM

BODY:

Too rarely does an American institution recognize an African American as an authority on matters that affect all our lives. More often, his or her perspective is sought on issues related to blacks: civil rights and race.

So when a District resident called me early this week upset about the "diminishing" of the late Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, I knew what he was talking about.

He was referring to those stories that, while well-displayed or prominently aired -- maybe even well-intentioned -- still described the great jurist primarily in terms of his contribution to African Americans.

Explosively, the caller railed: "He was so much more than that!"

Indeed, he was. Thurgood Marshall never saw a right he didn't vindicate -- whether it was for women, gays, prisoners. A fierce proponent of individual rights, he supported anyone who was oppressed, disadvantaged or downtrodden, ultimately transforming the way the law operated for them.

Even when he fought to extend equal rights to African Americans, to make the promises of equal protection a living reality, Marshall defined the rights of citizenship for all Americans. Indeed, to some blacks, the narrow descriptions of Marshall felt almost like a racial put-down.

By midweek, Marshall began to get his just due as more thoughtful commentators were heard from and their appreciation of the broadness of his views emerged.

At his impressive funeral on Thursday, an audience that included President Clinton, the 12 living sitting and retired justices and thousands of people of all races and stations gave Marshall a monumental expression of appreciation. Most important, he began to receive the context, perspective and historical significance that he deserved.

Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist noted that Marshall wrote more than 300 major opinions, and he called him an advocate of "civil rights for minorities and civil liberties for all."

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Referring to the inscription on the Supreme Court building, "Equal Justice Under Law," he said, "Surely no one individual did more to make these words a reality than Thurgood Marshall."

Former secretary of transportation William T. Coleman Jr. noted Marshall's legal revolution, much of which "had nothing to do with race," with regard to women's rights, forced confession, improper police practice, right to privacy and habeas corpus.

Putting Marshall on a par with Abraham Lincoln, he said Marshall "gave cloth and linen to the work that at Abraham Lincoln's death was left undone."

In her reference to Marshall's "vision of law as an agent of social change," former Marshall law clerk Karen Hastie Williams touched on another unique and rarely mentioned Marshall contribution: an approach to law in which it is used as an instrument of justice and transformation.

Building on the legacy of Charles Houston, his teacher at the Howard University School of Law and NAACP partner, Marshall furthered this notion of solving social problems using the law and it formed the basis for many of the other transformations of laws that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s.

It's important to note Marshall's contributions to the whole of America, because he, like all blacks, is connected to the whole.

It is when people are able to view others as separate and apart that it becomes easier to dehumanize them and ignore the issues that affect them, and to be numb or blind to what happens to them and how that ultimately affects everyone.

Thurgood Marshall understood that fact, and he used his legal brilliance to make "equal justice under the law" more nearly a reality for all.

At his funeral, they bade us to live his legacy. "I hope that the nation has the will and moral courage to finish these two giants' [Lincoln and Marshall] unfinished business," Coleman said.

One important part of that legacy is to rid ourselves of the notions that African Americans have limits on what they can contribute to America, that their scholarship and abilities are measured by the color of their skin and not by the depth of their minds, courage, grace and fortitude.

TYPE: COLUMN

SUBJECT: JUDGES; FUNERALS AND MEMORIAL SERVICES

NAMED-PERSONS: THURGOOD MARSHALL