

## **UVA LAW | Swanson Award Thomas**

KIM FORDE-MAZRUI: Welcome, everybody. Thank you so much for being here. My name is Kim Forde-Mazrui, and I've been a professor on the faculty here for 26 years. And I run the Center for the Study of Race and Law, which contributes an event to the University-wide MLK commemoration every year. And we're delighted to have Judge John Charles Thomas be our speaker this year for this event.

This event commemorates, first of all, two people who joined the ancestors too early, but who nonetheless continue to inspire us today-- that's Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mr. Gregory H. Swanson. And we remember them for their character, their courage, their perseverance, their commitment to justice, and try to be inspired by them to continue their work.

And then, we also honored two people today that are, fortunately, still with us. One is the student recipient of the Gregory H. Swanson Award, and the other is Judge John Charles Thomas. And I will give more introductory remarks about Judge Thomas after the Gregory Swanson Award presentation that Dean Risa Goluboff will present. Thank you.

**RISA**

**GOLUBOFF:**

Thank you all for being here. It is wonderful to see you. Welcome to the Law School's Martin Luther King, Jr. commemoration. This is the first time that we have gathered together for this event in three years, and it is really wonderful to be here. I want to thank Kim Forde-Mazrui, who is a professor at the law school and director of our Center for Study of Race and the Law, for spearheading the event this year and every year, and also thank you to the honorable John Charles Thomas, Class of '75, for speaking to us today. I'm really looking forward to your lecture on "Law and Justice are Not the Same."

It is my role, first, to present the sixth annual Gregory Swanson Award. From the first time that we gave this award, we did it at our Martin Luther King Day commemoration, and that was on purpose because Gregory Swanson belongs to the historical narrative of this law school, this University, our Charlottesville community, our Commonwealth, and our nation. And so Martin Luther King Day seems to me-- and has seemed from the beginning-- the appropriate time to tell Gregory Swanson's story and make sure that we never forget either his story or him. So before I give the award, let me just tell you a brief version of his story.

Gregory Swanson was the first African-American law student at UVA. He was the first African-American student at any part of UVA. And he was the first African-American student at any university in the former Confederacy. We celebrated him for the first time at UVA in 2018.

This story about Gregory Swanson had always been considered one of shame and a failure for the university, and as such, it had long been excluded from the way we told our history. Mr. Swanson had received his law degree, a JD, at Howard University, and he was hoping to get a job as a law professor at the black Terrell Law School in DC. And he applied here for an advanced degree, an LLM, to make him a good candidate for that job.

The law school faculty voted to admit him, but the university refused to admit him, and he sued the University of Virginia with help from the NAACP, including Thurgood Marshall. There was an oral argument here in federal court downtown in what was then the federal building and the post office and is now the library. And the upstairs room of that library now has a plaque about Gregory Swanson and is called the Swanson Room. So after the court found in his favor, the University admitted him, and he came to our law school.

Gregory Swanson believed that his admission to UVA Law would be, quote, "A triumph in the struggle to break down segregation and discrimination, or to bring about equalization in education facilities." It was not easy for him to be a law student here. He was the only Black student at a white university in a segregated white Southern town. He was isolated. He was excluded from many parts of University life.

At the same time, he found some support among his fellow students and faculty and from the local YMCA. And with dignity and courage, he made the most of his education here. He took eight courses over the academic year even though his program did not require him to take any. He took so much advantage of what the University had to offer, and he told his story and stood up for civil rights not only here, but around the Commonwealth as a frequent speaker at Black churches, for the NAACP, and in editorials in newspapers.

There were many myths that have circulated about Mr. Swanson's departure from UVA Law School over the years-- that he left early, that he failed to get his degree, or that the University outright refused to grant him one. It turned out after we began doing more research into his history that none of those stories was true and, in fact, the real reason was pretty prosaic. We had a new LLM program in the mid 1940s, which was the program that he did in the early 1950s, and it wasn't particularly well-organized.

Very few people actually received their LLM after attending this program. They did coursework while they were here. Then they were expected to leave, go back to practice or go into practice, and finish writing their theses while they were in full-time practice. This was not something that very many of them managed to do. That was especially hard for Mr. Swanson, who, while he was a student, represented an African-American man accused of rape, who was eventually put to death at the end of that year despite Mr. Swanson's efforts.

He spoke, as I said, often publicly about civil rights. He played a prominent role in civil rights organizing in the Commonwealth. He set up his own private practice after he left here. And then, the Terrell Law School closed and the reason that he was aiming to get this degree was no longer on the table.

So he completed his year in residence. He left the law school with every intention of finishing his thesis. And like so many others, he found his life and career taking him in other directions.

In other words, there was so much success in Gregory Swanson's story here-- success in using the law to do justice in the best traditions of our profession, success in changing the face of this University and this Law School, and inspiring other African-Americans who quickly followed him to UVA, and prompting other universities in Virginia to integrate after his successful lawsuit-- success in helping to make us the diverse and inclusive institution we are today, a goal we still aspire to and aim to achieve in the future. Success in navigating a situation that would have cowed a lesser man or woman. A success, in short, in changing the world.

And for all his many contributions, Gregory Swanson was honored by the Maryland General Assembly last May and by the Virginia General Assembly in 2016. As I said, we began commemorating Gregory Swanson in 2018 and have done so every year since. We do it again today. We want him to be a name that all of the members of our community know.

As it may already be clear from the ambivalences in this story, today is not only a day of celebration. It's a day of commemoration, which is different. It's something more sober. It has a quality of contemplation. It marks that the history that we are commemorating today is not all joy and light. There's a lot of regret in the story that I've been telling. But telling this story enables us, also, to repudiate parts of it-- to repudiate our past as a segregated university and law school, our past of slavery, and exclusion, and rejection.

At the same time, telling this story, and telling it in conjunction with our Martin Luther King commemoration, where we honor not only King himself, but all of those who have made and continue to make the world a more just and equal place, including tonight's speaker Justice Thomas. This enables us to honor Gregory Swanson and embrace him as part of our national history and our civil rights history, the history of this University and Law School, as the client determined to integrate the University of Virginia, the lawyer who brought a lawsuit to make that happen, and the person who lived that integration firsthand with dignity and grace.

Telling the story reminds us that we remake our history every day. We remake history in part through the stories that we tell about ourselves and our past. We get to shape who we are as an institution and who we want to be in the future. And we have chosen and we choose every day to be the institution that Gregory Swanson saw in us and helped us to become. That is an ongoing process.

So we created the Gregory Swanson Award to link our past and our present. And presenting this award provides an opportunity to tell Swanson's story so that his name is one we all know, one of the people who made our institution, and also to honor members of our community today who are following his path and his footsteps. So I am delighted today to announce an honor to honor Gregory Swanson and his legacy by announcing the winner of our Sixth Annual Swanson Award, which recognizes students for their courage, perseverance, and commitment to justice. As one of her classmates put it, few emulate the character courage, perseverance, and commitment to justice exemplified by Mr. Swanson as authentically as our winner, third-year law student Yewande Ford.

[CHEERS, APPLAUSE]

You're going to have to stand here for a while, OK? Because I'm going to talk about you. OK.

Across her 2 and 1/2 years at the Law School, Yewande has shown herself to be a true servant leader. Here at the Law School, she has served as-- get ready for a long list-- the president of our Black Law Students' Association chapter, the editor-in-chief of the *Virginia Journal of Law and Technology*, an admissions ambassador, and a mentor for countless students in [INAUDIBLE], older, wiser law students, first-generation professionals, and Virginia Law Women. Yewande also serves on the board of Afro Scholars, an organization that provides exceptional first-year law students from underrepresented backgrounds with career coaching, professional development tools, law firm mentoring, and early summer associate recruiting opportunities.

A former investment banking analyst at Goldman Sachs, Yewande has spent her summers at Linklaters and Kirkland and Ellis, and last semester, she worked as an honors intern in the Enforcement Division of the United States Securities and Exchange Commission. Professor Michael Doran, who taught Yewande federal income tax and who supervised an independent research project for her, writes that Yewande, quote, "Has an energetic but disciplined mind, she is undaunted by new challenges, and she has a heart of gold. Rarely have I encountered such a combination of high intelligence, genuine modesty, and absolutely unflinching kindness. She inspires me, and I know she must inspire others in our community as well."

Leila Khalid, one of Yewande's student recommenders, saw Yewande's leadership as a model for her. Quote, "I noticed how she always worked hard to empower Black law students and build a community from the ground up. Even the smallest gestures she would do, like waving and greeting all the 1Ls in the hallway, made me admire her because I could tell she genuinely cared about the well-being of her community. She never failed to take the lead and advocate for her members at the law school. She was never scared of speaking up and calling out injustices she encountered. I admire her bravery and charisma, and I learned a lot about leadership from her.

The many letters supporting Yewande's nomination for this year's Swanson Award echoed these same themes-- that Yewande makes her classmates feel like they have a home here, that she shows up for her friends, colleagues, and student organizations in ways large and small, that she, quote, "lifts as she climbs," as in Tolu Oduwole's paraphrase of Mary Church Terrell's famous quote. That, as Tolu, put it, "her leadership is felt at both the macro and the micro levels." And that by the example she sets, Yewande reminds the students she mentors of who and what they can be-- role models to others and pathbreakers in their own right-- a path breaker she herself is as she enters a practice area that, as Professor Doran points out, is less diverse than many others.

I will say, as Dean who worked with Yewande as a student leader, I saw all of these things. And I could not be more proud of who you are, of how you embody leadership, and of how you represent our law school. I want to end with Professor Kendrick's reflections on how fitting this award is for Yewande. Quote, "It is not lost on me that Yewande want plans to be a tax lawyer, just like Gregory Swanson. It is also not lost on me that she led BALSAs in the aftermath of what was probably the biggest nationwide civil rights movement since the movement of which Mr. Swanson was a crucial part. In their conduct and their character, they are the best that UVA has and that it has to offer the nation." I am delighted and honored to present this year's Swanson Award to Yewande Ford.

[CHEERS, APPLAUSE]

**YEWANDE FORD:**

Thank you, everyone, for coming out. I am extremely, extremely honored to receive this award. Thank you to Dean Goluboff. Thank you to the Committee. Big shout-out to BALSAs, and

[CHEERS, APPLAUSE]

--and [INAUDIBLE] BALSAs, and all of my recommenders. And last but not least, I want to give a shout-out to my parents and my fiance, my village on whom I stand on. And everything you see in front of you today is because of them and my village. So thank you again, and I look forward to the rest of the program.

**KIM FORDE-MAZRUI:**

First-- and we often celebrate people for their firsts-- but I want to ask, why is that? What's important and worth recognizing about being first, at least in this context. And the image of a trailblazer-- to me, at least, I imagine somebody going through a thorny bramble bush, untamed forest, and the machete, and cutting through and making a trail. And that is admirable. But I think that metaphor is inapposite to the situation in at least two respects.

First of all, that image is that there is no trail. So the trailblazer is creating a trail that didn't exist. But in the case of John Charles Thomas and other of our Civil Rights heroes, the trail didn't exist. It just didn't allow certain people-- didn't allow certain people, especially because of their race.

And then, the other thing that's inapt is it's not inanimate objects, or brush, or trees, or thorny bushes that's blocking the trail. It's people. It's individual people, and it's our society.

And that makes it especially amazing to think about the challenge of blazing down this trail, because it means going into a space where many people don't welcome you, doubt you, have skepticism about you, or are looking for you to fail. It can also often be, as he writes in his outstanding memoir, a lonely journey, even though you often feel the weight of your people on your shoulders.

So we should-- the first isn't just being first like winning a race. It's being first of a people who were excluded previously and continue to be in some ways resisted. So with John Charles Thomas, he grew up in segregated Norfolk, as he writes in his memoir in a house broken by poverty and alcoholism and violence. Yet, he managed to do well in school and do part-time jobs, with the support of his especially his mother and other relatives.

By high school, he was one of the few Black students who, because he was so accomplished at that young age, was asked to do, again, the challenging thing of being the first to integrate the White high school. They wanted it to be only people who would be able to do well, so it wouldn't be proof that they were unequal to the task.

At the early age of 19, he was appointed by the governor to be on the Virginia Commission for Children and Youth. He was one of the early Black students to integrate the University of Virginia and to integrate this law school. After law school, he was the first associate hired by Hunton, Williams and Gibson, I believe, at the time-- who, if I'm not mistaken, was actually even involved in defending segregation in the earlier decades. One of the first, probably the first associate at Hunton.

Eventually, when he became partner, he was the first Black partner at any major Southern law firm. He also, at the young age of 32, was appointed by Governor Rob to the Virginia Supreme Court, the youngest justice ever of any race, and the first Black Justice. After serving with great accomplishment in that role for several years, he had to step down because of health issues but was able to return to Hunton. But he continued to serve outside of his immediate occupation traveling the world, meeting world leaders, learning from others, and teaching others. He was also appointed to the Court for Arbitration of Sport, which is an international organization of leading lawyers and judges who resolve international disputes over sports and doping and other matters.

He has given constitutional law lectures at West Point, where he's also a friend of the West Point Class of 1917. He served on the Board of Visitors of William and Mary, on the Thomas Jefferson Foundation. He's been commencement speakers at many places, including we are blessed to have here at UVA. He also speaks to our [INAUDIBLE] class.

He's received many awards, including the Distinguished Alumni Award from UVA, the Virginia Bar Association Award, and Lifetime Image Award from the NAACP. So his life is one to admire and one to learn from. And I want to close with two themes that come from my learning more about him by reading, by reading his memoir, which will be available afterwards if anyone would like to purchase. And I think Judge Thomas may be available to sign them.

But it's just the first question. I have two questions. One, how did you endure and succeed through such adversity? He talks in the book about the Virginia Military Institute, where he's also spoken, and how they have this adversity of training method where they treat cadets on the ratline as the lowest animals on Earth, and that's supposed to break them down and rebuild their character. And he says in some ways, his whole life has been adversity of training, and how do you survive?

I mean, he says himself, the fact that he is not physically broken is a minor miracle, and the fact that he's psychologically well is astounding. So it really is an amazing story. And then, my final question builds off of that, but how do you love institutions that you could justifiably resent? I'm sure it wasn't easy at UVA and I'm sure it wasn't easy in your life as you recount.

But your devotion to UVA is second to none. The orientations you speak at, the commencements, the BALS graduation banquets, speaking here today-- that's more than just being a dutiful alumnus. That shows real love of the school. And also, despite the prejudice you experience and that you about and that you've lectured about throughout this country's history, and that we'll probably hear more about today, I feel from reading your book that you love this country.

Most notably, speaking at West Point-- I think that was one of your most impactful speeches, to the, I think it was the Class of 1969. But also, every year, you recount the Declaration of Independence, or you have many times at the citizen swearing-in. That's such a patriotic thing to do. And many people, understandably, who've had your experiences would be bitter . But somehow, you not only have succeeded, but you've been able to love those around you and the institutions that you've had to endure through.

So I really look forward to learning about your thoughts on why law and Justice are not the same. And let's welcome Judge Thomas to the podium.

**JOHN CHARLES** Thank you so much, professors. It's my great privilege to be with you here today. Before I talk about anything, **THOMAS:** I've got to honor the presence of Mr. Eugene Williams and his wife. He's a great civil rights leader from Charlottesville. I knew him when I got here 57 years ago. Hello, Mr. Williams. I'm so happy to see you.

[APPLAUSE]

To the Dean of the Law School and the Dean of the Nursing School who's also here, it's my pleasure to stand in front of you today. Law and justice are not the same thing, but our citizens think that it might be. But we come to law school-- and I have to tell you, when I came to law school here in 1972 and finished here in 1975, I've been thinking back. I don't believe that there was a time in any course that we ever talked about justice.

Now, the law is difficult, and there's a lot of law. And you've got to learn the law. and you've got to understand the statutes. And you have to understand the principles.

And maybe there's just so much law that you don't have time to think about justice. But I do want you to have it in your spirit as you go about your lives to remember that justice is important. Now, this is Martin Luther King Day here at the school, and though the professor has asked a lot of questions about me, there ain't no way I'm going to stand up here and talk about myself before I talk about Dr. King, I actually saw him preach two times with my own eyes. He came to a church in Norfolk where the crowd outside was so big, they had to stop the traffic. It was thousands of people in the street outside of New Calvary Church in Norfolk.

I had gotten into the church. I went there early, and I got a seat in the balcony. But you know church people, particularly in the Black Baptist church, they can take an ownership interest in the seats that they normally sit in. And so these strangers were at this church where Dr. King was preaching. And this lady comes and says, you ain't sitting in my seat. And she just sat on top of the people who were in her seat. So I wound up listening to Dr. King kind of bent over to the side like that.

But the thing about him, when you heard him, boy, he always rose to the occasion. And I was wondering, you know he talked a lot about justice. You will remember the very famous quote, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." But that's not the only thing that he said about justice.

But as we talk about the difference between justice and law, let me remind you that even at UVA Law School, outside of the building, you all see the thing up on the wall? That is to say that "Those alone may be servants of the law who labored with learning, courage, and devotion to preserve liberty and promote justice." So like we've got it written in the bricks that we're supposed to be thinking about justice.

But Dr. King really believed in justice. He was motivated by a sense of justice. And there's nobody better with the language of justice than Dr. King. And so we're just going to have to go and listen to some of the things that he said.

In one of his speeches, he says, give us the ballot, and we will fill our legislative halls with men of goodwill and send to the sacred halls of Congress men who will not sign a Southern Manifesto because of their devotion to the manifesto of justice. He believed in justice. Now, I actually knew somebody who signed the Southern Manifesto. I talk about it in my book. Justice Powell on the Supreme Court of Virginia actually had been nominated to the Supreme Court of the United States. The seat finally went to Lewis Powel, but Justice-- it was Powel who was a Congressman from Virginia, the reason he didn't get the seat according to all the scholars is that he had signed the Southern Manifesto.

And the Southern Manifesto, for y'all who know nothing about it, basically said, segregation today, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever. And so what King was saying is that if you were devoted to justice, you wouldn't do things like that. Now, he also said in that same speech, he told people to go back home with faith that the universe is on our side in the struggle. And, he said, stand up for justice.

This is important to keep in mind now because this man, who went places that were utterly dangerous-- if you read the autobiography, his autobiography, if you read about him, if you read "Parting the Waters: America in the King Years," he was like the tip of the spear. He was like the advanced troops, like special forces that we send overseas to the most dangerous places in the world. He would go to cities and to public events and speeches where everybody said they were going to kill him.

He was threatened all the time. People said they were going to blow up his church, blow up his house. I actually don't know how he could do what he did with the threat that faced him all the time.

He said, every step towards the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle. He says, the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals is what it takes to secure justice. We make our fervent pleas for the high road of justice, and then we tread unflinchingly the low road of injustice. He would say that people are duplicitous-- they talk about justice, and then they don't live justice.

He says that true peace is not merely the absence of tension; it is the presence of justice. This man was motivated by justice. He changed America because of a sense of justice. And I hope that you have that in you.

Now, I thought about the times that I dealt with justice as a lawyer once I left here, since I don't remember studying and talking about justice here. And there were times as a lawyer that I would say as we were working on a case, I would say something like, why is that fair? Or I might say something like, well, that doesn't seem right! The people who are saying this, this is going to happen to them, and they're going to lose x, y, z.

I think I had a sense of justice. And I don't know how you get a sense of justice. I don't know where it comes from unless it's instilled in you as a child, it may be these things that you learn in kindergarten, kind of the sense of right and wrong. And I hope that you have it because it makes a difference when you're out there dealing with people's lives.

Now, I can remember on the Supreme Court of Virginia that we would sit and talk about a case, and every now and then, the law can tie you in a knot. Every now and then, there's so much law focusing on a problem that when you put the facts in from somebody's life, the one law says you've got to tie the person up and hold them from a hook 10 feet above the water, and the other law says you have to punch them in the jaw, and the other. And you've got law telling you all things that you look at and say, god, how can that be right?

And so every now and then, the justices would say in conference, what is the justice of this case? What do we really-- what are we trying to do? What's the fair outcome?

Now, in Virginia, or at least a few years back-- we changed now to more of a federal procedural system-- but Virginia actually had two kinds of courts. We had the law courts, and we had the equity courts. Anybody ever studied equity? Do they teach equity here anymore?

But the equity courts were the closest that you might get to thinking about justice because the theory of the equity courts is that the courts were able to exercise the conscience of the King. And so in the equity courts, if somebody stole a loaf of bread because his baby was at the point of death and without a piece of bread was going to die that night, you could take that into consideration in the equity court. In the law court, you steal a loaf of bread, you pay a \$5 penalty, you go to jail for two days, that's it. It's formalistic.

And so we've changed now in Virginia to the unified system in the federal courts. But equity is still supposed to be there. And I saw you nodding your heads about equity. And so I think that's a good thing, to at least think about equitable principles. You don't come in-- you cannot come into equity with unclean hands. And you remember that, equity awards the vigilant.

I can't remember all the maxims of the equity, but there were 10 things. You had to know that for the Bar. I guess y'all don't have to do that no more. But you had to know that stuff for the Bar Exam.

And I was surprised. I was a young lawyer. I went to court right after I got to Hunton, somewhere in 1975. And I evoked some equitable principle, and I caught this judge's attention. And he goes, really?

I said, well, yeah, he's got unclean hands! And next thing I know, the judge has jumped all over the other side. I'm winning the case. I didn't know where it was coming, from just because I'm invoking equitable-- But I mean, the other guy got in serious trouble for because he didn't have a proper sense of justice.



Now, listen to Dr. King. I mean, nobody could write like this man. Power at best is love implementing the demands of justice. Inevitable. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.

And as I started, let us realize that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. And so what I want to say is, it is not a trivial idea to stop and think about the life of Dr. Martin Luther King. This was a man from a Southern town who spoke up with the most beautiful words-- I mean, almost poetic, the things that he said-- that moved the nation.

He would lift people up, people who were afraid. I mean, people in a room, people like you and me sitting here right now, we have to go out. They're going to have water hoses. They're going to have dogs. They're going to have people with bricks and bats, and they're going to be trying to hurt us.

But we're going to go out, and we are going to hold hands, and we're going to say, we shall overcome. Because truth crushed to Earth will rise again. Because no man can ride your back unless it's bent.

And people believed him, and they did it. And they walked across the bridge in Selma, where John Lewis was beaten to the point that his jaw was broken and he could hardly talk. And horses were run over people, and people with baseball bats hit people. But still, they made a change that makes America different today.

When I stand here and I look right here at this audience, Black and white, men and women, I know that it didn't always look this way, and it can bring me to tears. But it brings me to tears because of the suffering of people just like and me-- regular people like Mr. Williams and his wife and people here in Charlottesville who said, we're not going to stand for this. We're not going to have this kind of wrongdoing. We're not going to have a world where the law says that all people are created equal, and yet they don't treat us that way.

So while you're here at the great UVA Law School-- which is great-- and while you're learning from our magnificent professors-- which they are-- I hope that you can remember things from your childhood where you knew right from wrong. When mama said, no, don't do that, don't say that, don't be that way. Share, be fair, don't hurt nobody. All those things, I hope you keep within you so that when your time comes, when you're on the Supreme Court-- because you will be-- when you're advising governors and presidents-- because you will be. You just can't believe how fast it happens.

I mean, I finished here when I was about 25 years old. By the time I'm 32-- I'm 72 now, so 40 years ago-- I'm on the Supreme Court of Virginia with people who had never gone to school with a Black person. Every justice on the court with me was 21 years old or older, so every single one of them was old enough to be my father.

None of them had gone to integrated schools because that's not the world that they came from. And so they're sitting there with me, this young Black kid from the housing projects, and from broken homes and hand-me-down books. And I'm at the table with an equal vote.

Now, I could have been quiet and listened. I could have sat there when the vote came around to me from time to time and said, well, whatever y'all say, I'm going to do. But I never did that, not even from the beginning. From the first time it came to me, I told them what I thought because I thought that was my job.

One of the things that we bring to the table when you are of a different perspective and a different worldview is can expand the reach and the thought of that entity just by bringing your perspective. And so don't you ever sit in class or ever sit at a board meeting and think that have nothing to say because these other guys, they just might not know.

For example, we would have domestic abuse cases because in those times, we had criminal cases. And we would be talking about a restraining order that somebody had gotten against a man who wanted to kill them and all their children. And to the others on the Supreme Court, it was a technical exercise.

Well, the statute says that the court can issue the order for 30 days, and then it needs to be reviewed. And I think that this judge did the right thing by suspending the order. And I'm sitting there and saying, do you what it feels like when somebody who hates you is standing on the other side of the door with an ax or a gun, and they will knock the door down to kill you? I've been there!

This is not a technical exercise. This is real. People's lives are in the balance. So don't be sitting here going through statutes with me. You tell me the best way that we can remedy this situation so this lady don't die while you're sitting in here going through page numbers and section numbers.

That's the difference a different perspective can make. Now, before too long, the justices on my court came to appreciate that. They really did. When I left the court-- I had a brain tumor-- some of them cried when I left the court. I mean, stuff happens.

So I get a [INAUDIBLE] plastic neuroepithelial tumor affecting the amygdala and the tip of the hippocampus in the right temporal lobe, subject to resection, as the doctors at Mayo would say every time they looked at it. But when I had the chance, when I was there-- as I want all of you, white Black, blue, brown, whatever you are-- when you're in that room, when the vote is yours, when everything might hang in the balance, speak up. Put your viewpoint in there. Grapple with it. It changes the result. That can be amazing the way it changes the result.

People who you thought were staunchly of a particular view, all of a sudden, they're saying, well, John-- this is my old white guy.

[LAUGHTER]

Well, John, I hadn't looked at it that way. But now that you mention it, OK. Maybe this one time, we can do this, that, or the other.

Now, John, we don't want to break the law of Virginia trying to help somebody-- things like that would be said. But we found a way. And so I felt like from time to time, I was meant to be there.

And I think all of you are too. You come places like this, you can wonder like, God Almighty, can I handle this? I mean, it's tough here. It was tough here a long time ago.

In the book, I write about how my Black classmates, now we come to school, we had been tipped to the fact that the professors in our day, they had put on the doors to the classroom, the book assignment, and the page assignment, and all this stuff. And so the very first day in class, there wasn't any messing around. It wasn't filling out name charts and things like that. You were in class.

It was like, Mr. Thomas, what was the issue in *Jones versus* so forth and so on on page such and such? And what do you think that the court meant? And we were like, well, damn!

[LAUGHTER]

We didn't have notebook books. We didn't had no books. We didn't have highlighters. But all our white classmates did. And so we thought it was some kind of conspiracy-- like god, what did they do this to us for?

And so we all left the first day of law school, ran down to the corner, bought the books at the bookstore. They had these bookstores at the corner that sold all the law books and things. And we huddled up at night and came running back to school the next day trying to catch up.

But anyway, I guess the word gets out better now than it did in our time. But this is Dr. King Day. He was meaningful, he was purposeful, he had intent.

He loved the idea of justice. And though law and justice are not the same, we are part of the justice system. And there is the need for justice in our world. And there is the need for people who understand the role of justice in our lives.

And there's a place for compassion. And there's a place for heartfelt feeling, even in the law that we handle. And so with that, I'm going to stop talking and let Nadine ask me any questions that she wants.

[APPLAUSE]

**RISA GOLUBOFF:** First, I want to say, thank you. That was really amazing and affecting. And I hope that people will buy your book and read your book because-- and we'll have more of a conversation-- but I hope it's already clear from what you just heard that when we think about the arc of justice, and we think about the history of this institution and the history of our Commonwealth and our nation, you are a major part of that history, Justice Thomas.

**JOHN CHARLES** Thank you.

**THOMAS:**

**RISA GOLUBOFF:** And you say, I don't how King did it, but that's the question that Professor Forde-Mazrui asked you, right? How did you do it?

And so I think, well, I want to start there. But before I start there, I just want to show everyone your book. So this is the book-- it's outside-- *The Poetic Justice*. And we'll talk at the end about "why poetic?" But let me just preview by saying Justice Thomas's compliments of Dr. King's poetry was not a throwaway that's something you hold very close and you embody yourself in a huge way.

So I'm excited to get to that part. But let's start with Professor Ford [INAUDIBLE] question. How did you do it?

**JOHN CHARLES** For me, most of the time, it was not a question of any grand strategy. It was a question of baby steps and survival. I mean, when you read the book, you'll see I meet my father in the penitentiary. He had been convicted of a felony. And so he's in there when I'm a young kid.

When he gets out, he's an alcoholic and violent. He beats my mother with his fists until the point that one day-- I'm six years old-- he's beating my Mamma, and I think he's gonna kill her. And I tell-- I get the biggest knife I can find. And I say, if you hit my Mamma again, I will kill you.

Now, apparently, it caught his attention. I mean, West Point talks about the command voice, being in the military. And now, I'm a six-year-old kid. He could have knocked me out with one punch, but he froze. And when I said, you hit my mama again, I'll kill you.

And he spent the rest of his life never knowing what I might do from the time I was six years old. And so for me it was not like, oh, I have this chart, and I'm going to do this, that, and the other. It's more like, I'm going to take these newspapers, and I'm going to make \$0.25, and I'm going to buy a loaf of bread, and I'm going to get two slices of bologna and bring it home. And so it was more like that.

It was more a little bit at a time. And before too long, you can kind of make your reputation. Like, that's the good kid. That's the smart kid. If you ask him to do something at school, he'll do it. He'll turn the paper in. He'll be on the program. It's like that. It's that slow building, but nothing grand, for me.

**RISA** So maybe nothing grand, but you also write, I mean, there is something grand in all of those small things, right?  
**GOLUBOFF:** And there is something heroic in all of those small things.

And you write in your book about how you often felt the weight of your race upon you right as you went through the world, as you were all these firsts, as you-- you say it as if it's nothing all the things you did. It's not nothing, what you did-- either personally, or educationally, or professionally. So can you tell us a little bit about, how did you bear that weight?

**JOHN CHARLES** That came about, in large part-- now, I'm born in 1950, prior to Brown. So the Brown decision comes out in '54.  
**THOMAS:** The implementation decision comes out in '65. I go to all segregated schools from first grade until I finished junior high school, so only in my senior year-- which is '65-- Virginia comes up with this thing called the Freedom of Choice School Desegregation Plan.

I don't whether you've ever heard of that, but here's what several Southern states said. OK, here's what we're going to do. We don't need no federal courts. We don't need no busing and all that. We don't need no outside interference.

We're going to let any Black kid choose to leave his neighborhood school and choose to go to any white school, and any white kid can choose to leave his neighborhood school and choose to go to any Black school. There, we're integrated; leave us alone. Well, there were no white kids who chose to leave their neighborhood schools to come to the schools that we went to in the Black neighborhood.

Why? Because we were under-resourced. We had the hand-me-down books. We didn't have all this stuff in the labs that school and all that. And our teachers decided, we're not going to play this game. We're going to get students who had good grades-- I mean, I was part of it.

I can remember being in junior high school and one day hearing over the loudspeaker, they were calling these names. And my name was one of them, but all the names were the kids with good grades. And they called us to a room, and they said, you know, what are we doing here?

Y'all have to go to the white school. Why? Because we are fighting for integration. And if you don't go, it's gonna to fail.

We need volunteers. Raise your hands. That's how they treated us. Like, yes, ma'am.

[LAUGHTER]

Now, before that moment, to the question the Dean was asking me is about the burden of your people, our teachers in the all-Black schools basically told us, you have to go change the world. You have no choice. When you leave this environment, the all-Black environment, nobody is going to give you a break. Nobody is going to give you a hand. You're going to have to be better than the best of them.

So basically, they raised this generation of little soldiers. And they were telling us, when you go, basically, to white school-- which is how they said it-- when you go to white school, you're going to have to show these people who we are. And so we felt that burden. I mean, we didn't just pick up the burden. It was kind of laid on us.

And so I come along with a generation and see Elaine Jones's portrait hanging in the hall. And Elaine is older than me by four years or so, but she was in that same group. It was that same cohort, and in others who went to school here. It was a group of us that, wherever we went, you have got to change the world.

And we tried, the places that we went. But since they told us we had the burden on us, well, we pretty much agree. [LAUGHS]

**RISA** You paint a picture of yourself as so compliant. I don't think anyone in this room believes that you did everything  
**GOLUBOFF:** out of compliance, though.

**JOHN CHARLES** Those teachers were kind of tough.

**THOMAS:**

[LAUGHTER]

**RISA** So white school, that was your first white institution.

**GOLUBOFF:**

**JOHN CHARLES** Right.

**THOMAS:**

**RISA** But then, there were a whole bunch more white institutions. And you write about how you were often caught

**GOLUBOFF:** between these two racial worlds.

**JOHN CHARLES** Right.

**THOMAS:**

**RISA** Between the Black and white worlds. So how did you-- how did you navigate?

**GOLUBOFF:**

**JOHN CHARLES** I actually had-- it really was different. I mean, for example, when I came to UVA undergrad in '68, most of my

**THOMAS:** classmates at home in Norfolk, they went to historically Black universities like my family had before me-- the Hampton, and the Virginia State, and so forth. But I came here.

And so when I go home, I actually had to kind of revert to the person I was at home. There was a UVA person, and there was a person at home. It was the sound of my voice might even be different.

And so I had to come back to the way we talked at home because if I didn't do that, the guys thought I was being standoffish. If I talked like I did in first-year English class at UVA and [INAUDIBLE] Hall to the guys I was raised with, they'd be, you think you're cute. So we couldn't do that.

And so I knew-- and it happened again as a lawyer-- most of the white lawyers at the firm were-- all of them, they were members of the Virginia Bar, and this bar, and all at the Richmond Bar. But there's also something called the Old Dominion Bar which existed because Black lawyers weren't allowed to be members of those white bar organizations at an earlier time. And so I had to be a member of all the Bar Associations while I was at Hunton. I had to join the one that my other colleagues were joined, and I had to be a member of the Black Bar Associations too.

And so basically, I'm living in more than one world. But you can get used to that.

**RISA** Did you get used to that?

**GOLUBOFF:**

**JOHN CHARLES** Yeah, I'm still here.

**THOMAS:**

**RISA** [LAUGHS] So one of the things-- Professor Forde-Mazrui talked about this in a specific context, which we can talk about, but I want to talk first more broadly. I liked when Professor Forde-Mazrui was saying. We picture pathbreakers, trailblazers, as up against nature. You think about the big themes of literature-- man versus man, man versus nature, man versus himself. We picture trailblazers as man versus nature, but it's really man versus man.

And that can make you bitter. That can make you angry, to face the kind of discrimination you faced in so many of these different institutions. And you write and you show, also, in the book all the lessons that you took from the many experiences that you had. And many of those lessons were positive lessons.

And anyone who sees you, who talks to you for a minute, who sits in this room can see the unbelievably positive energy that you bring to the world and the affirmation that you bring. So how do you maintain that in the face of trailblazing against people who don't want you in these spaces and who aren't accustomed to seeing a person like you?

**JOHN CHARLES** I've thought about this, and here's what I think, the best I can do approaching it. I suppose that if you were up

**THOMAS:** against a brick wall, and you were pushing and scraping and doing all you can, and you never saw any movement, and you never saw-- you could say, it could break your spirit. But as it turned out, as I was coming along in these different settings, I could see a little bit of difference. I could see-- for example, I used to like chess, which I don't much anymore. But I used to be reasonably good at chess.

And so there was this white guy at the high school who was like the president of the chess club. And I challenged him to chess at lunch one day, just out of the blue. And I beat him. And he was so astounded that he gave me his box of droopy tournament chess men. And I still have that box. But he forever wondered, how did this Colored kid beat me?

But he became a friend of sorts because he knew, well, that guy can play chess. And then, other people I met and got to know, they became a little more friendly. I joined the Key Club, which-- the Kiwanis Club. It was me and another Black guy. We joined the Key Club, and we invited them to our church. And so it makes the news-- "White club goes to Black Church." Because everything we did in that day was in the newspaper.

And so there's these white guys at the Black Baptist Church in Norfolk. And so just a little bit, you can see, I run for like the teacher in one of my classes says, well, who wants to be homeroom representative to the student government? And I go, I do. Now, I'm the only Coloured kid in there. I get elected the homeroom representative because I said I would do it.

And so along the way, I'm saying that if you can see some change, if you see a little crack in the door, if you see a little light coming in, I think in that setting, you can keep pushing. And I was able to see that enough to keep going.

**RISA**  
**GOLUBOFF:** And you're too modest to say this. You said, if you can see a little change-- and you say that a little bit in-- it's not quite the passive tense, but you say it kind of objectively, neutrally. But what you're telling us in the stories-- and what I hear which you're not going to is, I could see the change I was making. that you, by playing chess, you changed that person's mind. And you, by raising your hand, you changed that person's mind. And that you could see, it might not have been revolutionary, but at least incrementally.

**JOHN CHARLES** Right.

**THOMAS:**

**KIM FORDE-** That you were making-- you, John Charles Thomas, were making a difference.

**MAZRUI:**

**JOHN CHARLES** These little steps. Right, yeah.

**THOMAS:**

**RISA**  
**GOLUBOFF:** So I want to raise the question that Professor Forde-Mazrui-- his second question, right? So given the challenges in so many of these institutions-- the stories that you tell about being a UVA undergrad and a UVA Law student, and the challenges that you faced, and the discrimination on an institutional level, and your love-- you're wearing your tie, you're a booster-- and the love that you have for this institution, and more broadly, as he said, your patriotism in a country that has done you wrong in lots of ways and continues to do wrong in lots of ways. How do you continue to embrace, against the odds, your country institutions that have been really challenging places for you?

**JOHN CHARLES** Well, in my family, my mother's brothers, several of them were in the Army. And they were in the Army. They  
**THOMAS:** were all over the world in the Army, and they loved being there.

And one was an Army pilot. One was An Army parachutist. One was in armor with the tanks and all that. And so these guys, they were heroes to me.

And so I saw my uncles who cared about the United States in that kind of patriotic way. But in the Black community, it wasn't any lack of patriotism. I mean, it was a whole lot of, I love this country. Why is the country doing me so wrong?

Even in "Lift Every Voice and Sing," it talks about the love of our nation. And so there was never any lacking that. Now, when I came to UVA for the first time, it was in 1967. My high school basketball team at Morry got to play in the state championship basketball

I was not on the basketball team. I was the guy with the ammonia capsules who taped angles and all that.

[LAUGHTER]

But I got to come up here. And so we had a day when we could go anywhere we wanted to, and I walk over to UVA. I come from the front side of the rotunda, and I walk up on the lawn, and I think it's beautiful.

This is back in 1967. It was all-male. Most of the dudes had on the khaki pants and the blazer or something like I got on now. And I look around that corner, and I go like, god, that is gorgeous, just physically beautiful, and I wanted to come here.

And then, when I go back to the white high school, now I was a national achievement scholar in the National Merit Program. I don't whether y'all know what that is, but I was a National Merit Semifinalist. I didn't win the National Merit, but in those days, a National Merit Semifinalist who was Black won something called the National Achievement Scholarship, which was the same amount of money. And so I had the same money to spend.

And when I go back to the white high school and I tell my guidance counselor who was white, I want to go to UVA, you wouldn't be comfortable at UVA I think need to go to, basically, all the schools your family has gone to all your life. But I go, I want to go to UVA.

Now, in that moment, because I had won this National Achievement Scholarship, I get letters from all over the country-- from Williams, and Brown, and others-- from Dartmouth, but not UVA, which kind of made me mad. And so I thought it was beautiful. I wanted to come here. And because they didn't ask me to come, I decided I was going to come here.

[LAUGHTER]

And I did.

**RISA** And the rest is history, as they say.

**GOLUBOFF:**

**JOHN CHARLES** Yeah.

**THOMAS:**

**RISA** I think you can see a theme of taking up the challenge, right?

**GOLUBOFF:**

**JOHN CHARLES** Contrarian.

**THOMAS:**

**RISA** You don't shy away from a challenge. So speaking of UVA, there's our founder, Thomas Jefferson, evokes lots of different views from lots of different people. And you were on the board of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation which runs Monticello. And I wonder if you could tell us your thoughts. How do you think about Thomas Jefferson?



**JOHN CHARLES** Well, one of the reasons I went on that board is that I knew that they were involved in events that related to telling the historical story, basically. And I figured if I was on that board, I could help be sure the story was told with accuracy and that people didn't try to whitewash things. And so part of my being there-- I used to think, I bet you Jefferson is turning over in his grave to have me on the board here.

But here's the thing, the way I look at Jefferson. And it's a way I look at history largely. There, to get to this moment-- where we are in our society now-- when you look back over the long arc of Genghis Khan and his hordes passing on some structure, governmental-type structure, to that part of the world, with the Pax and the Peace of Rome, and the armies putting down rebels and so forth, it's brutal.

And there is no historical person or entity that can withstand today's scrutiny. They just can't. When we look back, we are more noble. We are more compassionate. We are-- when we look at historical figures, they almost always lose.

But I had to come up with some measure to treat with historical figures. And so here's what I decided to do. I'm going to look at the wholeness of their lives, and I'm going to ask whether, if you take the wholeness of their life, did they help us get to where we are today, or did they detract from it?

Now, Jefferson has his problems, and he did the things that humans do. And he messed up and screwed up. But he did have this magnificent idea that all men are created equal, and blah, blah, and so forth. And that was repeated by Lincoln. And that was repeated by Dr. King. And that was repeated by the students at Tiananmen Square.

And so I have concluded that that thought piece of his-- the Declaration-- has always been running in the background of American history, even in the days of brutal civil discord, and Dr. King and the marches. In the mind of America, there is, all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among them-- so I believe that what he did in that moment was so profound in getting us to where we are today that he gets-- OK, you did all right. You didn't do perfectly, but you did all right.

Now, just to give you some contrast, I look at Woodrow Wilson, another Virginian who becomes president. I mean, when he's president, he re-segregated the civil service that had already been integrated. He takes Blackacre bodies out of cemeteries and sends them to all-Black cemeteries. And I can't stand that.

And so I look at him and say, if he had his way, we would still be Balkanized, and broken, and fragmented. As and so I can't stand it, and I'm happy his name was taken down from Princeton. So there is a way to look at the world that maybe you can appreciate, but that's what I've been doing.

**RISA GOLUBOFF:** So you could hear, just there, in the, "all men are created equal," the beginnings of a poetic voice. And this is called *The Poetic Justice* for a reason. And I want you to tell us, how did poetry become an important touchstone in your life, and what role has it played for you?

**JOHN CHARLES THOMAS:** Well, my grandfather was born in 1890. I'm born in 1950, so he was 60 years old when I was born. He's my mother's father.

He was a father of 15 children, including my mother. So he had all kind of grandchildren, including me. But I lived at the old big house. I was born in the house where my mother was born.

And anyway, I was around my grandfather. And he picked up on the fact-- he was not a well-educated man. He was a carpenter and a builder and from the countryside of Virginia.

But he was Masonic, and he loved poetry, and he loved oratory, and uplift, and betterment. And he I figured out that I have a stunning memory, which he was right about. Today's people would say I have an eidetic memory, but when I was four, my granddaddy some kind of way figures out I have this memory, so he decides to teach me classical poetry.

He teaches a four-year-old kid a poem called "Thanatopsis" by William Cullen Bryant, which is a view of death. And I'm able to learn the poem by rote memory with my grandfather just sitting there saying, "Can you say to him who in the love of nature holds communion with her visible forms, she speaks of--" Yes, and I would do that. And he would add another line. So it goes on for months.

And at some point, as a baby, I know this poem. And he would call me, his buddies would come to see him-- he had had a stroke, and he had this exercise thing on the side porch. And these old guys would lean up against the banister. And he would say, come here. Yes, granddaddy. Say that poem. Yes, granddaddy.

Hold your head up. Yes, sir. What's the poem? "Thanatopsis" by William Cullen-- then I would recite the poem. Well, these old guys would be beside themselves. They would scream and yell, and they were, go, go, go, go! It was like, it's something They'd never seen.

And so, basically, he put me on stage when I was four years old, which, left me never having stage fright. I've been in front of an audience basically all my life. And basically, he tested my memory and he made it so that I could pick up things and keep it. And as I sit here now, I 100 poems by memory. But anyway, when I'm on the Supreme Court of Virginia, we're in conference arguing about a case, and I could say, that decision is in volume 329, it's on page 29, and the quote that we want stands at the top of the next page.

And I would go pull a book down and turn it like that, and they would go like, oh, my god! But that's the kind of memory I have. And I've kept that kind of memory. But it started with poetry.

Now, there comes a time-- I'm at the white high school, the same one where the lady said I wouldn't be comfortable at UVA and all that. I'm the only Black kid in Advanced English. You can see that I probably had some language skills. And we had to write a poem, a short story, or an essay for one of the main class requirements.

Now, what you've got to is that the theory was no Negro belongs at white school in the '60s. And so if I failed a class, it would make the newspaper. You would wonder why, but the teachers were talking to the media. We told you they weren't no good. And so we were under scrutiny the whole time.

I'm sitting in study hall on a Monday, just prior to the English class, and I'm just twiddling my thumbs. And I look, up and all my white classmates for the next class have these typed things with the plastic cover. And they're talking about it. And I go like, oh my god, the assignment is due today.

And I had 20-something minutes to go, and I said, I guess I have to write a poem. Now, I'd been reciting poetry from the time I was four. I was 17. I had never written a poem. It had never occurred to me that you could write a poem. You just did other people's forms.

And so in that 20 minutes, with my life on the line and it was going to be in the newspaper if I didn't get it right, I write a poem for the first time ever. I write this poem so fast that I can print it again in a neater hand. And so when we go to class, my white classmates are dropping their themes in the box on the edge of the desk. I don't whether y'all ever had to do that with computers and things.

And I hand the lady this piece of paper. Well, she can read it. It's just one piece of paper. The class forms.

Now, if you were a Black guy at white school in those days, you're going to be on the front row to be watched. And so my desk is right on the front row. She calls the roll, she takes my poem, she holds it by the corner, she walks to my desk, she throws it at me, and in front of the class, she says, I reject this. I do not believe a Colored child could write this.

This is in the '60s in Virginia. Now, what I had written was a poem called "The Morning." The first thing I ever wrote, and I had written it in 15 minutes.

And at the time, I said, the morning is a time for man to rise, review the things that formed his past, make all his disappointments and mistakes quite clear so they will be his last. The morning is a time for man to think of all the things to come, to plot, to plan, to try his best to be ahead when day is done. The morning is the time for man to dream of things not yet conceived, to gather his thoughts and ideas around the things that he alone believes. The morning is a time for man to rise and think and dream and see that all the world depends on men who with thoughts of hope the day begin. That's me at 17.

[APPLAUSE]

**RISA** So I was going to ask you to recite a poem. So I'm glad you did. Before we open it up to questions, one last  
**GOLUBOFF:** question. You recited your poetry at Carnegie Hall once. Can you tell us about that?

**JOHN CHARLES** Well, here's how. I was on the board at William and Mary, and we were-- it was an Academic Affairs Committee  
**THOMAS:** meeting. It actually was at Bruce Hornsby's house, whose wife was on the board with me. And we were gathering-- you know how people gather and they introduce themselves and see all the professors who are coming.

Well, I'm a professor of art history, and I'm a professor of music, and I'm a professor of philosophy, and all these-- and at first, I just didn't feel like-- well, I'm a judge.

**RISA** Yeah.  
**GOLUBOFF:**

**JOHN CHARLES** I didn't feel like, I'm a judge, I'm a lawyer, so I go, I'm a poet.  
**THOMAS:**

[LAUGHTER]

And so one of the music professors says, a poet? What kind of poet are you? And I say, I'm a lyric poet in the romantic tradition. And she goes, what kind of-- so I started reciting.

I don't need to read a poem. I've got them all in my head. So I started reciting poetry. And I sit by this lady, and I recite poetry. And she says, you know what? If you send me your poems, I think I can compose music based on your poems.

And I say, I've never done that before, and I ain't gonna start now. She persists. I send them. She writes music based on one of my poems. And then she says, if I can write music based on your poems, I wonder if you can write a poem based on my music. And I go, oh, I don't know, send me your music.

And she sends me a piece called "Allure." And I write a poem called "The Allure of the Muse." Well, anyhow, this is a person who thinks all kind of crazy things. She goes to the director of the Muscarelle Museum of Art at the College of William and Mary. And she says, I think we ought to do a concert at Carnegie Hall as a fundraiser for William and Mary, and darned if they don't do it. And I'm the star poet. And I do 17 of my poems with two classical pianist and a jazz combo.

And I opened the program with that high school poem, and I closed it with the high school poem. At the end, though-- I mean, it opened with music. At the end I, stepped to the edge of the stage, and I say, don't crush somebody's spirit by the hatred you have inside of you. Don't diminish someone's goal. And I started to form, and I started crying.

And I go like, oh god, I'm going to forget my poem after all these years. And so I start crying. The audience starts crying. So I'm like, oh, Jesus, and I get-- basically, I get through the poem.

**RISA** I have no doubt some in the audience are crying today alongside you as well.

**GOLUBOFF:**

**JOHN CHARLES** So here's the poem I'm going to do. This poem is called, "Like until now." People ask me sometime to write poems, and I tell them, I just can't write a poem. I never can just sit down and make myself write a poem. What happened to me was my grandfather put the scaffolding of poetry in my head. And so what will happen is that I'll be doing something and the words will fall into place.

**THOMAS:**

But they fall into the same meter and the same-- I actually have the same meter as Longfellow. And so when I recite Longfellow, I feel like it's my own poetry. Anyway, Tim and Daphne Reid, who you may from television, I helped them as their lawyer when they were buying a studio down in-- what was it-- Petersburg. Anyway, while I'm sitting in the closing, all the lawyers are passing the papers and all that. I get this idea in my head about light.

And I go, the Bible says that God said, let there be light. The physicists say that in the Big Bang, the first thing was light. On the movie set, the director says, lights, camera, action, and I get this light thing in my head. And so I start writing, writing.

And Daphne says to me, what were you doing? And I show her-- it's actually on their movie poster-- part of my poem. But I wrote a poem called, "Light the Soul." And this actually talks about the role of justice in our lives. And one of the things I picked up along the way is the idea, who's ever heard that the candle that lights another candle burns no less brightly.

Anybody heard that? I didn't make that up. I got that from somebody. But if you've got a candle, and the other candles are unlit, and you share the light from your candle, you lose no light. So everybody gains when you share light, share knowledge, share understanding.

So I wrote the poem, "Light the Soul." And I said, "Light lay quietly at the beginning till it was called into action by God. Then it split the darkness, warmed the cold, brought emotion to the stillness, touched our souls. And they say there is light at the end. As we brace ourselves for the final journey, the word is there is light even then-- light that blinds you, binds you, then sets you free.

From alpha to omega, the light shines through. From dawn to dusk, it orders what we do. By particle and wave, it prompts the birds to sing. By pulse and reflection, it points out the way.

Light can lift depression, dispel despair, bring hope to the weary, lead us from fear. Light can raise up emotions, quiet the storm, beckon us from rolling seas into the calm. we learn by light, we grow by light. We sit in the dark transfixed by its sight. And as the light flickers, our hearts respond. We can see the connections. We can feel the bonds.

It has been given to handle the light, to mold it, to craft it, to bend it to right. It has fallen to scope what we see-- to sharpen, to brighten, to make it run free. To those who would hold light in their hands, there is much to remember, to understand. In the right light, love can shine. In the right light we can leave wrong behind. By the light, there is good we can know. In the light, justice can grow, like the soul.

[WHOOPING, APPLAUSE]