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*Judge Constance Baker Motley:
'A Significant Life'
by Donita Judge
Guest Commentator*

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On a Friday morning in early November, I, along with hundreds of others, attended the memorial service at Riverside Church in New York City for Judge Constance Baker Motley. Unlike the services of Mrs. Rosa Parks, held earlier in the week, there was little fanfare. There was no two-hour wait to join the many persons who came to pay respects, rather there were seats for all who chose to attend. There were many judges, scholars, civil rights activists and politicians who attended this moving memorial, but it was your ordinary people who just "stopped by" to remember and honor Judge Motley that remain etched in my mind. One woman said she heard about it at the last minute, cut short her morning errands and came to pay respect to a woman who worked tirelessly and quietly to eradicate some of our country's worst injustices. I sense some of the persons in attendance were there because maybe they had met her walking the streets of New York or like me, met her for the first time when she was honored last year at the commemoration of the 50th Anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* in Washington, D.C., for her lifelong work. There is great significance to Judge Motley's life and her passing.

Judge Motley's life is significant because while a lawyer at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., she worked determinedly to end segregation in public education, won 9 of 10 cases tried before the U.S. Supreme Court, became the first African American woman to be elected to the New York State Senate, first woman elected as Manhattan's Borough President, and the first African American woman appointed to the federal judiciary. Her life is significant because she was not viewed solely as an icon but as a woman, who happened to be black, who not only *sat* as a jurist on the federal bench but also *stood* for "Equal Justice Under Law" and brought black women's participation into full view.

This period in time is noteworthy because in the past four weeks, our country and our community have lost the voices of four women who stepped forward to move our country closer to equality when the possibility of equal opportunity appeared an impossibility: Judge Constance Baker Motley, C. DeLores Tucker, Vivian Malone Jones and Rosa Parks. It is important because in many ways these women were linked to one another and to all of us. Judge Motley represented Vivian Malone Jones in her successful attempt to gain admission to the University of Alabama. Mrs. Jones went on to become the first African American woman to graduate

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from that University. C. DeLores Tucker fought tirelessly to increase opportunities for black women, stood firmly and would not be moved when she objected to lyrics of music that she believed denigrated black women. Rosa Parks, among other contributions to our community, sat down for a moment in time that altered the course of history. These contributions are significant because these women shared courage of conviction and understood they could and should make a difference. It is appropriate and important that we honor each of them.

I would like to be privileged to the conversations between these women when they finally have an opportunity to meet again: I imagine "DeLores" holding open the door to allow all the sisters to enter; "Vivian" will offer a resounding statement, "it is only important to be first when there are others coming up behind you;" I am sure "Rosa" will quietly add, "ain't gonna let nobody turn us around" and finally, I imagine "Connie" remarking, "we have fought a good fight but the struggle is far from over . . . "

For whatever the reasons hundreds came together on a beautiful fall morning to remember Judge Constance Baker Motley and to bid her farewell, it was a fitting and poignant tribute by family, friends, and acquaintances who sat quietly as she was honored and remembered.

Rest peacefully Judge Constance Baker Motley, for yours was a significant life.

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