Like most people in this country, I first saw Charles Ogletree when he represented Anita Hill during the Senate confirmation hearings for Clarence Thomas in September 1991. He was, like Hill and Thomas, the center of a national story. In that era before the Simpson trial, before the Oklahoma City bombing, before September 11, and before the Internet, it was a rare moment of national focus and of national division as well. At the vortex of this tremendous moment, Ogletree had a poise and power that seemed well beyond his age.

He appeared as an iconic figure, larger than life, a man with extraordinary presence who, with virtually no time to prepare, led Professor Hill through a grueling process. I knew that he had been a public defender in Washington, D.C., before he became a professor at Harvard, the most powerful and prestigious of schools. For years afterward, when I thought of the ideal lawyer, who stood up against long odds for people with little power, I thought of Charles Ogletree. In the years since, I have been fortunate enough to have the chance to work with him and to see that the image matches reality.

In January of 2000, I began working on a book on the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, and I attended a meeting that Randall Robinson convened at the TransAfrica Forum to discuss the growing reparations movement. I distinctly remember meeting Ogletree. My initial impression was that he was, well, much younger than I expected. I recall marveling at how someone so distinguished could be so young.

A group of scholars who had written about reparations, including Ibrahim Gassama, Mari Matsuda, Ali Mazrui, Robert Westley, and Eric Yamamoto, met with activist lawyers like Robinson and Ogletree and politicians like Representative John Conyers, and those who were just then beginning to work on reparations cases. There was much discussion of strategies in the nascent reparations movement. What would we try to accomplish? How would we do it? C-SPAN was there to record the discussion, and that meeting has since acquired a little fame, though mostly among those who attack academics who write and litigate for reparations. And therein lies a story.

In 2001, the Oklahoma legislature’s Tulsa Riot Commission completed its work, confirming what we already knew: the Tulsa riot was an unprecedented breakdown of the rule of law; much of the destruction was caused
by men deputized by the local police forces; there were promises made to help rebuild the community that were not fulfilled; the courts were under the control of the Klan in the years after the riot, and there were (and are) still people alive who suffered during the riot. Along with the Riot Commission’s acknowledgment of the tremendous injustice done to the victims of the Tulsa Riot, sympathetic journalists like Brent Staples of the New York Times, V. Dion Haynes of the Chicago Tribune, Scott Gold of the Los Angeles Times, Arnold Hamilton of the Dallas Morning News, and Andrew Meier of the Financial Times, published stories that brought the riot and its atrocities to public attention. In fact, in the fall of 2001, I had a book coming out on the Tulsa riot and Charles was kind enough to lend his name to help promote the book. Many people began to look seriously at Tulsa as a front on the reparations struggle. In short, Tulsa looked to be an ideal place to seek reparations through the legislature or, failing that, the judiciary.

By the fall of 2002, when Charles spoke at the University of Tulsa College of Law, the stars aligned so that he entered the struggle to fight for some manner of justice for the Tulsa riot victims. Eric Miller, a reparations scholar who had worked closely with Ogletree, had become convinced that Tulsa was the place to go and began working to convert others to the cause. Over the next several months, Charles and his colleagues at the Reparations Coordinating Committee, like Robinson, Adjoa Ayetoto, Roy L. Brooks, and Ronald Walters, teamed up with Washington, D.C., lawyers Michele Roberts, Michael Hausfeld, Agnieszka Fryszman, and Suzette Mal-veaux, and with people in Tulsa like Leslie Mansfeld of the University of Tulsa College of Law, to prepare a complaint.

The complaint, largely the brainchild of Ogletree and Eric Miller, was an important product of critical race studies. Written like a history book, with the assistance of Scott Ellsworth, the riot’s leading historian, it chronicled the destruction of the self-confident and increasingly prosperous black community of Greenwood. The complaint cites critical race literature and the newspapers and court records of the time. It represented what Mari Matsuda called for back in 1987 in her article Looking to the Bottom: Critical Legal Studies and Reparations,¹ for it tells the story of the powerless and is an attempt to have their claims fully heard, for the first time, more than eighty years after they suffered at the hands of the government.

I had the pleasure of working for Charles as we drafted the complaint and the litigation team ran up to the filing deadline. I saw his rigorous legal mind, which was leavened by a warm sense of humor. I recall particularly well one light moment when he was talking with John Hope Franklin on the day of the filing. Dr. Franklin and some of his childhood friends had some questions about the case, and Ogletree took time for the call. Ogletree said, “This is your lawyer, Dr. Franklin.” What a moment, as Ogletree, a man who grew up in poverty, attended Stanford University and then Harvard Law School, eventually becoming a tenured professor at Harvard, spoke with the most distinguished African American historian ever to live. Charles specializes in those moments, putting together people who share interests in the use of law for the purpose of justice.

¹. 22 Harv. C.R.-C.L. L. Rev. 323.
I could not help but draw parallels between Charles and some of the leading civil rights advocates in Oklahoma around the time of the riot. Charles took his direction from his intellectual ancestors, including Roscoe Dunjee, who as editor of the Oklahoma City Black Dispatch preserved much important information on the riot. Dunjee’s fearless reporting preserved the text of the front-page story in the Tulsa Tribune that was (in Dunjee’s words) the “false story that set Tulsa ablaze.” The article serves as a testimony to the segregation of memory of the riot that for years afterwards the front-page story was believed missing. It had been torn from all extant copies of the Tribune, so anyone looking to white sources would not have found it. But just a few weeks after the riot, Dunjee had reprinted the complete story on the front page of his newspaper. All it required was for someone to look at the black sources to find the story and much other important information about the riot. Yet no one had seen fit to look there for years. Dunjee had not only preserved the memory of the riot, he urged Tulsa’s riot victims to file a lawsuit in federal court. Ogletree and his team complied with the advice given lo’ those many years ago by Mr. Dunjee.

In February 2004, Charles and the rest of the legal team appeared in federal court in Tulsa to argue against a motion to dismiss. It was an emotional day; the lawyers for Tulsa were, to say the least, indifferent to the elderly riot victims. One of them had said, in what I recall as a mocking fashion, in an earlier hearing that the riot victims had grown older “settin’ on their rights.” The City even filed a motion to sanction the plaintiffs’ lawyers for filing a frivolous complaint. The motion was, of course, denied by the federal court. For Charles is never frivolous. He was, instead, on that day as on any other, the model of integrity and poise. He argued eloquently for the Tulsa riot victims. And, had the court been more sympathetic, it might have “heard” their plea for their suit to go forward. For in denying the plaintiffs’ tolling argument in a motion to dismiss, the district court left the plaintiffs without another day in court. The case has ended, but Charles has not given up; he is pursuing justice through other means: Congressional hearings.

In Charles, we have a man of immense humanity, who fights for justice on behalf of those who cannot fight for themselves, such as the victims of the Tulsa riot. In the 1920s, the plaintiffs had no shot at justice. They faced a court system whose grand jury had blamed blacks with exaggerated notions of social equality for inciting the rioting. Then the Ku Klux Klan took over the Tulsa courts and further ensured that Tulsa would not have to answer for the riot. For those victims, whose property was destroyed and who were told for so long that they had no right to relief, and who were taught that if they asserted whatever rights they had, they might be attacked, the era of Jim Crow continues yet.

Charles’s fight for reparations has not been confined to the Tulsa riot. He brought the Tulsa litigation team together with Alderman Dorothy Tillman of the Chicago City Council, whose ordinance requires companies that do business with Chicago to disclose their connections to slavery. Once again, Charles used his personality, his charisma, his connections, and most importantly his talent. And when I was involved in a public and controversial movement for an apology from the University of Alabama for the faculty’s involvement in slavery in the years before the
Civil War, Charles was there with encouraging and insightful words. His support meant much to me then, as it does now. But it is not just in litigation and activism that Charles has been supportive. He also taught me much about scholarship and has been remarkably generous with his time in commenting on my academic work.

Charles has been at Harvard for twenty years and at the business of doing justice for much longer than that. I have no doubt that he will continue to pursue justice for a great deal longer, for there is no one else who shares his humanity, his talents, his dedication, and his influence. No one else can occupy his place, to be eyes to the blind, legs to the lame, and father to the poor. With Professor Ogletree, we are in the presence of a person who will be thought of the way we now think of Charles Hamilton Houston, Roscoe Dunjee, and Thurgood Marshall.

When we celebrate the next twenty years of Charles’s tenure at Harvard, I hope and expect that we will have much more to celebrate, in terms of improving the lives of everyone. For that is what Charles works for; that is his legacy. And as long as there are people to represent, young people to teach, and scholarship to be written, we will need you, Charles.