The Ethical Principles of Timuel D. Black 
Educator, Historian, and Civil Rights Activist 
101 Years of Age and Fighting for Social Justice 
As Told to the UChicago 
Civic Knowledge Project (CKP)

1. All People are Equal.

CKP Comment: The words of the Declaration of Independence have always needed to be made more inclusive and taken more seriously.

2. Together, people really can do the “impossible,” maybe even the “miraculous.”

CKP Comment: Prof. Black learned this lesson during World War II. He remembers Eisenhower telling the troops “The impossible—we do that immediately; the miraculous may take a little longer.” He carried that message into his work for social justice.

3. You don’t quit because things aren’t where you want them to be at that moment, you keep pushing!
Hopes and dreams keep us alive. Prof. Black urges you talk to the elders—if your parents had not believed in the future, you would not be here.

4. Sometimes things get so singularly racial that people can’t see that it’s just human behavior.

Prof. Black is an activist and supporter of Black Lives Matter. He is also a democratic socialist who sees how important socio-economic class is. And he is a feminist who wants to see a woman become President of the U.S. He has always liked Dr. King’s message about how we are all part of a single garment of destiny, and how King acted on that message. In politics, and in life generally, it is important to judge people by their actions, not just their words. Prof. Black’s grandma would say to him, when he was making excuses for misbehaving, “I cain’t hear whatcha sayin’ cause whatcha doin’ talks so loud.”

5. A sense of community, of mutual support, is triumphant over immediate personal gain.

Prof. Black’s story, as he put it in Sacred Ground, is the story of his community, of Chicago’s historic Bronzeville. “You come from people”—that is something his Mama would always say to him. You need to talk to the
ancestors, the elders, and help tell their story, since it is your story too. That is why he called his book “Sacred Ground.”

6. Music has a way of inspiring us and shows that there is no monopoly on joy.

CKP Comment: Music, especially jazz music, has always been a source of inspiration and spirituality for Prof. Black. He loves these lyrics by the great Duke Ellington, “I don’t mind the gray skies/’cause they’re just clouds passing by.” And these lyrics by the famous South Side singer Sam Cook, “Well, you know, I’m so glad. I know that trouble don’t last always.”

7. We can all be researchers, we can all be listeners, and we can all teach our children the skills of oral history. Talk to the elders!

CKP Comment: Like his friend, the late Studs Terkel, Prof. Black has been a great champion of oral history. Oral history is often the “people’s history,” a way of recording the stories of the oppressed and dispossessed.

8. You don’t have to agree that somebody’s philosophy is correct to have an interesting and informative conversation with them.
CKP Comment: Prof. Black may well be one of the most beloved activists and community organizers in the U.S., and one of the best teachers ever, and this is in part because, like Dr. King, he believes in people. He knows how to talk to people and how to listen to them, even if he seriously disagrees with them.

9. If you don’t know where you came from, it is difficult to know where you are and why you are. Know your heritage and share it.

CKP Comment: Prof. Black’s memoir begins: “All four of my grandparents were slaves. I am the grandson and the great-grandson of slaves on both sides ... That is why I believe I am descended from the best and the brightest.”

10. You don’t have to be perfect to be historic.

CKP Comment: Prof. Black had President Obama in mind when he wrote this principle. He supported and admired Obama, recognizing his historic importance, but he wanted to see more progress on matters of social justice.

11. Freedom is a constant struggle.

CKP Comment: This is a famous line, and another song lyric, used in the “Song of the Freedom Singers” during the
Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964, and also used as the title of a book by activist Angela Davis.

12. Be prepared when the door of opportunity swings open, but above all, do not allow yourself to be bought.

CKP Comment: Prof. Black is very proud that over the course of his long life he has never allowed himself to be bought--that is, has never sold out to the forces of power and domination. He has always remained authentic and true to himself.