

Mrs. Rosa Parks: Before and after the bus

Written by Marian Wright Edelman, NNPA Columnist
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Our minds fasten on that single moment on the bus — Mrs. Parks alone in that seat, clutching her purse, staring out a window, waiting to be arrested. That moment tells us something about how change happens, or doesn't happen . . . We so often spend our lives as if in a fog, accepting injustice, rationalizing inequity, tolerating the intolerable. Like the bus driver, but also like the passengers on the bus, we see the way things are — children hungry in a land of plenty, entire neighborhoods ravaged by violence, families hobbled by job loss or illness — and we make excuses for inaction, and we say to ourselves, that's not my responsibility, there's nothing I can do. Rosa Parks tells us there's always something we can do. She tells us that we all have responsibilities, to ourselves and to one another.□

She reminds us that this is how change happens — not mainly through the exploits of the famous and the powerful, but through the countless acts of often anonymous courage and kindness and fellow feeling and responsibility that continually, stubbornly, expand our conception of justice — our conception of what is possible.

President Obama spoke these moving and right words at the February 27 unveiling of the beautiful new statue of Mrs. Rosa Parks in the United States Capitol's Statuary Hall — the first Black woman so honored. The ceremony also included eloquent remarks from Congressional leaders and a stirring performance of "Lift Every Voice and Sing" by the military choir that was a tribute to this bright North Star to freedom. Mrs. Parks, like Harriet Tubman before her, lit our nation's way.

The president's words were a needed reminder that Mrs. Parks was just one very bright star in a constellation of sacrificial Black and White stars who pushed and pulled our nation forward on the long stony road of struggle, activism, and sacrifice that began generations before her birth in Tuskegee, Ala. 100 years ago. So many Americans keep looking for the next Dr. King or Mrs. Parks to come and solve our problems and save us from our own responsibility to act. But Mrs. Parks and Dr. King were always part of a much larger whole. On the particular day in December 1955 when she refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus, she was one of a trained cohort of civil rights leadership in the city who had been putting the community infrastructure in place waiting for the right spark to ignite the needed anti-Jim Crow movement time in Montgomery. Jeanne Theoharis's new biography *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (and other recent books) is now shedding extra light on the fact that there was much more to Mrs. Parks than the story of the quiet seamstress who one day was just so tired she finally decided to sit down.

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In reality, Mrs. Parks was not only a seamstress but a respected local activist; was willing to work without a spotlight but was not meek or quiet; and did not spontaneously act out of the blue just because she felt tired. Mrs. Parks was neither complacent nor long suffering, and had been fighting for equality and justice years before December 1955. In fact, like most Black people raised under Southern segregation, Jim Crow, and injustice, Mrs. Parks resented them from the day she was born.

Before her arrest Mrs. Parks had served as the secretary of the Montgomery branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) for more than 10 years. As part of her work with the N.A.A.C.P., she investigated cases of violence and sexual assault against Black women, including Recy Taylor, a married Black mother who was walking home from church when she was abducted at gunpoint and gang-raped by a group of six white men in Abbeville, Ala. in 1944. In response, Mrs. Parks helped found the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor that attracted nationwide support, action that the *Chicago Defender* called the "strongest campaign for equal justice to be seen in a decade." Although Mrs. Taylor's attackers had admitted their guilt to local authorities, they were not convicted of the crime or punished—and Mrs. Parks was not done fighting injustice.

Nor was she alone. In all of her battles before and after her own arrest, Mrs. Parks was part of a coordinated movement of others sharing the same goal. The summer before her arrest she attended Highlander Folk School near Knoxville, Tenn., a training center for activism in civil rights and workers' rights. Immediately after her arrest, Mrs. Parks was supported by N.A.A.C.P. colleagues, including E.D. Nixon and others in Montgomery actively watching for the right moment to act. Alabama State College professor and Women's Political Council President Jo Ann Robinson was one of the key unsung heroines who were the backbones of most civil rights struggles who waited and watched for the right incident and opportunity and were prepared to help seize the moment and propel it into a larger movement.

Although many people think of Dr. King as the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, it's important to remember that Dr. King did not establish or spark that movement or most campaigns that developed into major movements across the South. He responded to the demands of the communities whose cups boiled over and was able to embody and communicate their hopes and dreams. In fact, when the Montgomery movement began, the community needed someone to be out in front. As the youngest and newest preacher in town, Dr. King was the top candidate because he had the least baggage. So he rose to the occasion and responded to and eloquently articulated the movement already in place.

As it happened, the Montgomery Bus Boycott quickly showcased Dr. King's enormous God-given ability as a leader and spokesperson with enormous courage. But what took place in Montgomery was repeated in Selma, Birmingham, and elsewhere and in the sit-in and Freedom Rider movements: Dr. King did not start those local movements himself either, but used his powerful eloquence and moral voice and willingness to go to jail with local people to amplify those movements already in process led by extraordinary local people such as Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham and the incredible Black children of Birmingham who stood up to fire hoses and police dogs and filled Birmingham's jails with child energy, courage, and determination to be free. Photos of these children under attack circulated around the globe led

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President Kennedy to submit what became the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to Congress and Birmingham's white power structure to agree to end Jim Crow in Birmingham's public facilities.

Today, too many would-be movement leaders simply want to be Dr. King or Mrs. Rosa Parks: they want the glory and privilege of leadership without the burdens or sacrifice and *sustained hard* work.

Movements are not built from the top down by powerful leaders but percolate from the bottom up from people who share common grievances. Nor are they the result of individuals acting alone, although the courageous actions of one individual can provide a powerful defining symbolic spark—just as with the image of the dignified and proud Mrs. Parks sitting on that bus and refusing to move. But if Jo Ann Robinson had not been watchful and ready with a mimeograph machine to run off 30,000 flyers to circulate to Montgomery's Black community about Mrs. Parks and calling for a bus boycott, and had not pushed her Dexter Avenue Church's young pastor into the forefront, who knows what might have happened? So we can and should be enormously inspired by Mrs. Parks at that moment. But we should be equally inspired and informed by all the work she and others did behind the scenes before and after that day, and by all of the other women and men whose names we'll never know who worked to end racial injustice before and after December 1, 1955. Their individual and collective decisions to stand up for themselves and one another created the Montgomery movement—and the Montgomery Movement changed America's conception of what was just and possible.

It is past time for another transforming movement in America today to challenge rampant and morally obscene wealth and income inequality in our nation and the materialism, militarism, poverty, and racism Dr. King warned could destroy us. We have come a very long way towards honoring the Declaration of Independence's affirmation that "all men are created equal with certain inalienable rights" and overcoming some of the effects of the huge birth defects of slavery, Native American genocide, and the exclusion of women and non-propertied white men from equal footing in our new nation. But we must continue to move forward until a level playing field is a reality and resist those who seek to move us backwards into a second post-Reconstruction era through voter suppression, mass incarceration, failing schools, absent jobs, and rampant poverty. This will require committed and prepared marathoners like Mrs. Parks, not sprinters or self-marketers seeking momentary glory in our 10-second attention span media-driven culture. Movement building is a complex and long term struggle that must be pursued with both urgency and persistence and a critical mass of citizens must step up to the plate and stay there until real change happens.

The German playwright Bertolt Brecht said: "There are those who struggle for a day and they are good. There are those who struggle for a year and they are better. There are those who struggle all their lives. These are the indispensable ones." Mrs. Rosa Parks was an indispensable one who struggled *all* of her life for freedom and justice as did countless unknown Black citizens. So let us not just celebrate her example and that of the young preacher leader and people of Montgomery, let's *follow* their example.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children's Defense Fund whose Leave No Child Behind® mission is to ensure every child a Healthy Start, a Head Start, a Fair Start, a Safe Start

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and a Moral Start in life and successful passage to adulthood with the help of caring families and communities. For more information go to www.childrensdefense.org .