



ROSA PARKS: A WOMAN OF GREATNESS PERSONIFIED

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ABSTRACT



"The journey of a thousand miles starts with a single step" and Rosa Parks, an African- American civil rights activist, took that one single step that would change the course of history of her people for generations to come. Set at the background of rampant discrimination, Rosa Parks stood as an inspiration for Black people, particularly women. This research paper throws light on the heroic role of Rosa Parks in fighting against the civil rights of Blacks in African-American society. It also explores the early life, education, professional life and her role as an activist in civil rights struggle with special reference to famous incidents like Montgomery bus boycott, her arrest for violating the segregation of rules, etc. The paper mainly highlights Rosa Park's personality, through which one gets to know her nature, her non violent attitude and how she has become a role model for many women. She shall always be remembered as not only a brave and a great human being but also as an extraordinary activist who shall always go down the annals of history.

Keywords: *Rosa Parks, African-American, Civil rights, Montgomery, bus boycott, segregation, annals*

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INTRODUCTION

Courage makes a man different from the others. A courageous man never waits for someone else to do the job, rather he does it himself. In life, people are remembered for their actions in doing something different and if their actions have a streak of courage in it, then it becomes the most memorable thing even after long years' passing. But does it mean that courageous people don't fear at all? True courage is more a matter of intellect than of feeling. Courageous people are still afraid, but they don't let the fear paralyze them. People who lack courage will give into fear more often, as they avoid the object they fear, which affects not only their self esteem but also their whole personality. Ralph Waldo Emerson once rightly said, "*Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.*" (Emerson, Web) This paper discusses a prominent personality in history who was responsible for the change in the Black History. It becomes essential to have a brief background about the past life before getting to know the true personality from the speeches given and what others have spoken while simultaneously discussing the deed that changed the course of history. This personality is none other than Rosa Parks.

THE BIRTH OF CIVIL RIGHTS AND ROSA PARKS

Known as the "the first lady of civil rights", and "the mother of the freedom movement, Rosa Louise McCauley Parks (February 4, 1913 – October 24, 2005) was an African-American Civil Rights Activist. The incident associated with her name is the Montgomery Bus Boycott which is worth being told in order to describe the courage which she decided to face single handedly. But before doing so, it becomes essential to have an understanding of the laws and practices prevalent at that time and it goes thus: In 1900, a community by name Montgomery had passed a city ordinance (essentially only whites could vote) to segregate bus passengers by race. Conductors were empowered to assign seats to achieve that goal. According to the law, no passenger would be required to move or give up their seats and stand if the bus was crowded and no other seats were available. Over time and by custom, however, Montgomery bus drivers adopted the practice of requiring black riders to move when there were no

white-only seats left. The first four rows of seats on each Montgomery bus were reserved for whites. Buses had "colored" sections for black people generally in the rear of the bus, although blacks comprised more than 75% of the ridership. The sections were not fixed but were determined by placement of a movable sign. Black people could sit in the middle rows until the white section filled; if more whites needed seats, blacks were to move to seats in the rear, stand, or, if there was no room, leave the bus. Black people could not sit across the aisle in the same row as white people. The driver could move the "colored" section sign, or remove it altogether. If white people were already sitting in the front, black people had to board at the front to pay the fare, then disembark and reenter through the rear door. But many times it happened that when the black people paid their fare and tried to reenter through the rear door, the bus would begin to leave, leaving the people stranded and to fend for themselves. The same thing happened to Rosa Parks. In 1943, Parks boarded the bus and paid the fare. She then moved to her seat but driver James F. Blake told her to follow city rules and enter the bus again from the back door. Parks exited the bus, but before she could re-board at the rear door, Blake drove off, leaving her to walk home in the rain. But this happened only once.

The second time Rosa Parks felt something amiss, she decided she would fight. And this is how the Montgomery Bus Boycott took place and people turned their heads dumb to face the lady that took the bold step. After working all day, Parks boarded the Cleveland Avenue bus around 6 p.m., Thursday, December 1, 1955, in downtown Montgomery. She paid her fare and sat in an empty seat in the first row of back seats reserved for blacks in the "colored" section. Near the middle of the bus, her row was directly behind the ten seats reserved for white passengers. Initially, she did not notice that the bus driver was the same man, James F. Blake, who had left her in the rain in 1943. As the bus traveled along its regular route, all of the white-only seats in the bus filled up. The bus reached the third stop in front of the Empire Theater, and several white passengers boarded. Blake noted that the front of the bus was filled with white passengers, with two or three



standing. He moved the "colored" section sign behind Parks and demanded that four black people give up their seats in the middle section so that the white passengers could sit. The driver Blake said, *"Y'all better make it light on yourselves and let me have those seats."* By hearing these words three of them complied. But Parks did not move, as the black man sitting next to her gave up his seat. Years later, in recalling the events of the day, Parks said, *"When that white driver stepped back toward us, when he waved his hand and ordered us up and out of our seats, I felt a determination cover my body like a quilt on a winter night."* (Parks Interview, web) Instead of moving to the rear section for the coloured people Parks responded *"Why don't you stand up?" "I don't think I should have to stand up."* Blake called the police to arrest Parks. When recalling the incident for *Eyes on the Prize*, a 1987 public television series on the Civil Rights Movement, Parks said, *"When he saw me still sitting, he asked if I was going to stand up, and I said, 'No, I'm not.'* And he said, *'Well, if you don't stand up, I'm going to have to call the police and have you arrested.'* I said, *'You may do that.'*" This wonderful act of bravery has sought applause from all over the world. But it is important to note that Rosa Parks suffered much in jail as she fought and also in her life as she struggled against life to keep her basic necessities intact and fight against illnesses and take care of her family.

During a 1956 radio interview with Sydney Rogers in West Oakland several months after her arrest, Parks said she had decided, *"I would have to know for once and for all what rights I had as a human being and a citizen."* In her autobiography, *My Story* she said: *"People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."* When Parks refused to give up her seat, a police officer arrested her. As the officer took her away, she recalled that she asked, *"Why do you push us around?"* She remembered him saying, *"I don't know, but the law's the law, and you're under arrest."* She later said, *"I only knew that, as I was being arrested, that it was the very last time*

that I would ever ride in humiliation of this kind..." (Parks, print). Despite all her courage and glory, Parks faced a lot of criticism.

Inspired by the boycott's success, thousands of people gathered in a Montgomery church on the evening of December 5 to listen to their new leader, Dr. King. In a spellbinding speech, King explained why the boycott must continue. *"There comes a time,"* he said, *"that people get tired. We are here this evening to say to those who have mistreated us for so long, that we are tired, tired of being segregated and humiliated, tired of being kicked about by the brutal feet of oppression."* (Dr. King's Speech, audio) But above all, King asked that the protesters fight without violence.

In all public appearances and in life, Parks was a very simple lady, humble at heart, but deeply saddened and concerned about her people's suffering. But she is not just a lady to brood over the sufferings of the world and keep quiet. Rather she is a lady of actions. She believes in doing something about the situation rather than taking it as a no-man's business. This quality in her makes her great. Her reasons are very simple and her points very clear, which points out of a woman who knows what she wants. Speaking to some students about her role in the Civil Rights Movement, Parks exuded confidence accepting no nonsense around her.

Rosa Parks gave a speech while receiving the Essence Award on May 29, 1993. Rosa Parks goes onstage to accept the Essence Award after being introduced by Eddie Murphy and hailed as a hero by Robert Kennedy, Jr. In her speech, she briefly reflected on the many hardships of the old days and the long strides that America has taken towards freedom and equality since. She said:

"...I had the faith and I prayed that we would one day not have to be insulted, mistreated and sometimes physically hurt and often killed because we just wanted to be free people. We were so very fortunate that young Dr. Martin King, Jr. came on the scene at that time and that he, along with so many others, helped to make our protests the success that it was. We will never go back to where we once were, and I just say, this is a wonderful night and I shall never forget it, it shall live in my memory as long as I'm here. Thank you." (Essence award, audio).



Following this speech, Parks gave yet another speech two years later. In her speech at the Man Million March, On October 16, 1995, Parks said, *"Thank you very much. I am happy to be here. I honor my late husband Raymond Parks, other Freedom Fighters, men of goodwill who could not be here. I'm also honored by young men who respect me and have invited me as an elder. Raymond, or Parks as I called him, was an activist in the Scottsboro Boys case, voter registration, and a role model for youth. As a self-taught businessman, he provided for his family, and he loved and respected me. Parks would have stood proud and tall to see so many of our men uniting for our common man and committing their lives to a better future for themselves, their families, and this country. Although criticism and controversy has been focused on in the media instead of benefits for the one million men assembling peacefully for spiritual food and direction, it is a success. I pray that my multiracial and international friends will view this gathering as an opportunity for all men but primarily men of African heritage to make changes in their lives for the better. I am proud of all groups of people who feel connected with me in any way, and I will always work for human rights for all people. However, as an African American woman, I am proud, applaud, and support our men in this assembly. I would a lot like to have male students of the Pathways to Freedom to join me here and wave their hands, but I don't think they're here right now. But thank you all young men of the Pathways to Freedom. Thank you and God bless you all. Thank you."*(Man million march, audio)

After the death of Rosa Parks, the Senate Floor Statement on October 25, 2005 about her death went as follows:

Mr. President, today the nation mourns a genuine American hero. Rosa Parks died yesterday in her home in Detroit. Through her courage and by her example, Rosa Parks helped lay the foundation for a country that could begin to live up to its creed.....As a personal note, I think it is fair to say were it not for that quiet moment of courage by Mrs. Parks, I would not be standing here today. I owe her great thanks, as does the Nation. She will be sorely missed. (Senate floor statement, print)

At a campaign fund raiser at the Henry Ford Museum in Detroit, President Obama had a chance to

sit and reflect inside the old Montgomery, Ala., bus on which Rosa Parks made history. He said, *"I just sat in there for a moment and pondered the courage and tenacity that is part of our very recent history but is also part of that long line of folks who sometimes are nameless, oftentimes didn't make the history books, but who constantly insisted on their dignity, their share of the American dream."*(Obama print) At the funeral service of Rosa Parks, Obama said, *"Parks is a model who has paved the way for Presidents and Senators to develop on the foundations she had established". He also added, "The position of Presidency would not have been rendered to me, had it not been for Rosa who had shown the way". (Obama's speech, audio)* The above statements from Obama show that Rosa had sought the admiration of even great leaders like the Presidents, who consider Rosa Parks to be higher and greater than them in making to be what they are currently. Former President Bill Clinton was one of the first speakers at the funeral of Rosa Parks. Clinton said, *"Let us never forget that in that simple act and a lifetime of grace and dignity, she showed us every single day what it means to be free. She made us see and agree that everyone should be free. God Bless you Rosa Parks."*(Clinton, print). Even the Honorable Minister Louis Farrakhan, in his speech at the funeral service said, *"My Sister and the Mother of this Movement sat down that we might stand. Her spirit was a spirit of defiance against an unjust law and an unjust social order. We cannot honor her legacy with song and speech."*(Farrakhan speech, audio)

Oprah Winfrey, the Talk Show host and the first richest African-American woman gave a touching and inspiring eulogy on Rosa Parks. She said, *"After our first meeting(Rosa and Oprah) I realized that God uses good people to do great things. And I'm here today to say a final thank you, Sister Rosa, for being a great woman who used your life to serve, to serve us all. That day that you refused to give up your seat on the bus, you, Sister Rosa, changed the trajectory of my life and the lives of so many other people in the world. I would not be standing here today nor standing where I stand every day had she not chosen to sit down. I know that. I know that. I know that. I know that, and I honor that. Had she not chosen to say we shall not -- we shall not be moved.... So I thank*



you again, Sister Rosa, for not only confronting the one white man who[se] seat you took, not only confronting the bus driver, not only for confronting the law, but for confronting history, a history that for 400 years said that you were not even worthy of a glance, certainly no consideration. I thank you for not moving.

CONCLUSION

Rosa Parks would not have been be well known today if her stand on the bus, and refusal to give up her seat had not lead to serious consequences and sacrifices for her and her family. As a result of her stand, Rosa was arrested, mistreated, lost her job, and became a public figure, constantly a person being either looked to for inspiration, or spat on to make an example of. Her husband also lost his job, and her family lost much of their privacy.

Rosa Parks did not just inspire change during the civil rights movement, but through an autobiography she wrote in 1992, aimed at the youth today, she inspired many to stand up for their beliefs, and understand the difference one person can make. The bravery and idealism shown by Rosa Parks and the participants of the Civil Rights Movement is one of the greatest American stories of discipline, determination and triumph. Jennifer Granholm, the first woman governor of Michigan State of USA, described Rosa Parks as “warrior” who fought for equality in African American society.

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