

Rosa Parks

In any great movement which effects great change in a nation or a people, there is something called a watershed moment. A watershed moment is that one signature event that triggered the onslaught of great and historic change. In American history, that watershed moment might be the Boston Tea Party. But in the context of black history, particularly when we consider the central role that the civil rights movement has played in black history in this country, there is really just one watershed moment that virtually anybody who understands black history will point to.

That event took place on December 1, 1955 on a simple city bus when a black woman by the name of Rosa Parks got on that bus. When the bus became crowded, the bus driver ordered Ms. Parks to relinquish her seat to a white man as was the cultural order of things at that time. But Rosa Parks was not interested in seeing that cultural order of things continue. She refused to give up that seat.

The explosion of outrage and social change that was released by that one simple act of civil disobedience is the watershed moment that anyone affected by the civil rights movement points to at the most important event in modern black history. Rosa Parks was arrested for not giving her seat up that day and the trial for that act of civil disobedience brought to the national spotlight another important leader in the civil rights movement by the name of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

This one event began to escalate and gather energy in the black community. It was an exciting and somewhat frightening time as the black community was energized and began to organize around these two courageous leaders and the result was the most powerful civil rights protests in the history of the movement occurred which came to be known as the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

There are many reasons why such a simple event has had such a powerful effect on a people such as it did on the black community of the fifties. Clearly the frustration and gathering power of a movement was already building in the black community. A situation like this can best be described as a tinderbox that is just waiting for a spark for it to explode into fire. When that simple black woman finally decided that she was no longer going to live in servitude to the white man and she put her foot down and said NO, that was the spark that set the civil rights movement in motion.

Rosa Parks was not a trained instigator or a skilled manipulator of groups. Because she was just a citizen and a simple woman with simple daily needs, that itself was a powerful statement that this was the time for the community to take action and effect change. She was not even looking to start a nation changing civil rights movement when she refused to give up her bus seat. As she said later in an interview about the event...

"I would have to know for once and for all what rights I had as a human being

and a citizen of Montgomery, Alabama." And then in her autobiography, My Story she elaborated that... "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."

Rosa Parks won the right to be treated as a human being for herself and for her people across America and even around the world with her simple act of civil disobedience. She is an inspiration to us all that we too must demand the right of simple human dignity for all people who are citizens of this great land. And the story of Rosa Park's defiance shows that if we demand that, it will be won.

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