

ALSO BY PAUL ROGAT LOEB

Soul of a Citizen

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THE IMPOSSIBLE WILL TAKE A LITTLE WHILE

A Citizen's Guide to
Hope in a Time of Fear

edited by

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The Real Rosa Parks

Paul Rogat Loeb

We learn much from how we present our heroes. A few years ago, on Martin Luther King Day, I was interviewed on CNN. So was Rosa Parks, by phone from Los Angeles. "We're very honored to have her," said the host. "Rosa Parks was the woman who wouldn't go to the back of the bus. She wouldn't get up and give her seat in the white section to a white person. That set in motion the year-long bus boycott in Montgomery. It earned Rosa Parks the title of 'mother of the civil rights movement.'"

I was excited to hear Parks's voice and to be part of the same show. But it occurred to me that the host's description—the story's standard rendition—stripped the Montgomery boycott of all of its context. Before refusing to give up her bus seat, Parks had been active for twelve years in the local NAACP chapter, serving as its secretary. The summer before her arrest, she had attended a ten-day training session at Tennessee's labor and civil rights organizing school, the Highlander Center, where she'd met an older generation of civil rights activists, including South Carolina teacher Septima Clark, and discussed the recent Supreme Court decision banning "separate-but-equal" schools. During this period of involvement and education, Parks had become familiar with previous challenges to segregation: Another

Montgomery bus boycott, fifty years earlier, successfully eased some restrictions; a bus boycott in Baton Rouge won limited gains two years before Parks was arrested; and the previous spring, a young Montgomery woman had also refused to move to the back of the bus, causing the NAACP to consider a legal challenge until they realized that she was unmarried and pregnant, and therefore a poor symbol for a campaign.

In short, Rosa Parks didn't make a spur-of-the-moment decision. She didn't single-handedly give birth to the civil rights efforts, but she was part of an existing movement for change, at a time when success was far from certain. We all know Parks's name, but few of us know about Montgomery NAACP head E. D. Nixon, who served as one of her mentors and first got Martin Luther King, Jr., involved. Nixon carried people's suits on the trains, and was active in the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the union founded by legendary civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph. Nixon played a key role in the campaign. But no one talks of him, any more than they talk of JoAnn Robinson, who taught nearby at an underfunded and segregated black college and whose Women's Political Council distributed the initial leaflets following Parks's arrest. Without the often lonely work of people like Nixon, Randolph, and Robinson, Parks would likely have never taken her stand, and if she had, it would never have had the same impact.

This in no way diminishes the power and historical importance of Parks's refusal to give up her seat. But it reminds us that this tremendously consequential act, along with everything that followed, depended on all the humble and frustrating work that Parks and others undertook earlier on. It also reminds us that Parks's initial step of getting involved was just as courageous and critical as the stand on the bus that all of us have heard about.

People like Parks shape our models of social commitment. Yet the conventional retelling of her story creates a standard so

impossible to meet, it may actually make it harder for us to get involved, inadvertently stripping away Parks's most powerful lessons of hope.

The conventional portrayal suggests that social activists come out of nowhere, to suddenly take dramatic stands. It implies that we act with the greatest impact when we act alone, at least initially. And that change occurs instantly, as opposed to building on a series of often-invisible actions. The myth of Parks as lone activist reinforces a notion that anyone who takes a committed public stand, or at least an effective one, has to be a larger-than-life figure—someone with more time, energy, courage, vision, or knowledge than any normal person could ever possess. This belief pervades our society, in part because the media tends not to represent historical change as the work of ordinary human beings, which it almost always is.

Once we enshrine our heroes on pedestals, it becomes hard for mere mortals to measure up in our eyes. However individuals speak out, we're tempted to dismiss their motives, knowledge, and tactics as insufficiently grand or heroic. We fault them for not being in command of every fact and figure, or being unable to answer every question put to them. We fault ourselves as well, for not knowing every detail, or for harboring uncertainties and doubts. We find it hard to imagine that ordinary human beings with ordinary flaws might make a critical difference in worthy social causes.

Yet those who act have their own imperfections, and ample reasons to hold back. "I think it does us all a disservice," says a young African American activist in Atlanta named Sonya Tinsley, "when people who work for social change are presented as saints—so much more noble than the rest of us. We get a false sense that from the moment they were born they were called to act, never had doubts, were bathed in a circle of light. But I'm much more inspired learning how people succeeded despite their failings and uncertainties. It's a much less

intimidating image. It makes me feel like I have a shot at changing things too."

Sonya had recently attended a talk given by one of Martin Luther King's Morehouse professors, in which he mentioned how much King had struggled when he first came to college, getting only a C, for example, in his first philosophy course. "I found that very inspiring, when I heard it," Sonya said, "given all that King achieved. It made me feel that just about anything was possible."

Our culture's misreading of the Rosa Parks story speaks to a more general collective amnesia, where we forget the examples that might most inspire our courage, hope, and conscience. Apart from obvious times of military conflict, most of us know next to nothing of the many battles ordinary men and women fought to preserve freedom, expand the sphere of democracy, and create a more just society. Of the abolitionist and civil rights movements, we at best recall a few key leaders—and often misread their actual stories. We know even less about the turn-of-the-century populists who challenged entrenched economic interests and fought for a "cooperative commonwealth." Who these days can describe the union movements that ended eighty-hour work weeks at near-starvation wages? Who knows the origin of the social security system, now threatened by systematic attempts to privatize it? How did the women's suffrage movement spread to hundreds of communities, and gather enough strength to prevail? As memories of these events disappear, we lose the knowledge of mechanisms that grassroots social movements have used successfully in the past to shift public sentiment and challenge entrenched institutional power. Equally lost are the means by which their participants managed to keep on and eventually prevail in circumstances at least as harsh as those we face today.

Think again about the different ways one can frame Rosa Parks's historic action. In the prevailing myth, Parks decides to

act almost on a whim, in isolation. She's a virgin to politics, a holy innocent. The lesson seems to be that if any of us suddenly got the urge to do something equally heroic, that would be great. Of course most of us don't, so we wait our entire lives to find the ideal moment.

Parks's real story conveys a far more empowering moral. She begins with seemingly modest steps. She goes to a meeting, and then another, helping build the community that in turn supported her path. Hesitant at first, she gains confidence as she speaks out. She keeps on despite a profoundly uncertain context, as she and others act as best they can to challenge deeply entrenched injustices, with little certainty of results. Had she and others given up after her tenth or eleventh year of commitment, we might never have heard of Montgomery.

Parks's journey suggests that change is the product of deliberate, incremental action, whereby we join together to try to shape a better world. Sometimes our struggles will fail, as did many earlier efforts of Parks, her peers, and her predecessors. Other times they may bear modest fruits. And at times they will trigger a miraculous outpouring of courage and heart—as happened with her arrest and all that followed. For only when we act despite all our uncertainties and doubts do we have the chance to shape history.

Adapted from Paul Rogat Loeb, *Soul of a Citizen: Living by Conviction in a Cynical Time* (St. Martin's Press, 1999); www.soulofacityzen.org.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Prisoners of Hope

Cornel West

He who has never despaired has no need to have lived.

GOETHE

A specter of despair haunts America. The quality of our lives and the integrity of our souls are in jeopardy. Wealth inequality and class polarization are escalating—with ugly consequences for the most vulnerable among us. The lethal power of global corporate elites and national managerial bosses is at an all-time high. Spiritual malnutrition and existential emptiness are rampant. The precious systems of caring and nurturing are eroding. Market moralities and mentalities—fueled by economic imperatives to make a profit at nearly any cost—yield unprecedented levels of loneliness, isolation, and sadness. And our public life lies in shambles, shot through with icy cynicism and paralyzing pessimism.

This bleak portrait is accentuated in black America. The fragile black middle class fights a white backlash. The devastated black working class fears further underemployment or unemployment. And the besieged black poor struggle to survive. Over thirty years after the cowardly murder of Martin Luther King, Jr., black America sits on the brink of collective disaster.