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## TRUTH IN LOVE

### Rosa Parks: Resolute Leader America Needed

By Parris J. Baker  
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For many Americans, Sunday, Dec. 1, 2024, came and went like any other Sunday. People followed time-honored Sunday traditions . Families attended religious services. Other Americans joined in the weekly rituals (tailgating or watch parties) held in the citadels of the National Football League. And many Americans prepared for Cyber Monday, in which \$13.3 billion would be spent, an increase of 7.3% from 2023.[1]

However, 69 years ago, on Thursday evening, Dec. 1, 1955, Mrs. Rosa Louise McCauley Parks decided, without fuss or fanfare, to violate the oppressive and humiliating Jim Crow laws of segregation. The Supreme Court of the United States, in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896), upheld the constitutionality of the Louisiana law that codified the “separate but equal” doctrine for white and colored races. Alabama had already instituted legislation that segregated public schools (1875) and railroad passenger cars (1891).



Every day there are sets of individuals born, with qualities and characteristics unknown to the world, to their community and family, and many times, even to themselves. These unsuspecting individuals will influence the lives of others. Ordinary, “everyday people,” just like you and me, who will perform extraordinary deeds. Everyone is born with these qualities and characteristics, though at birth, they may not seem particularly discernible and noteworthy.

In one sense, Mrs. Rosa Parks<sup>[2]</sup> was not unique. She was not the first Black woman in Alabama to refuse to give up her seat to a white person on a bus. Nor did she wake up early Thursday morning with the goal of becoming a civil rights icon. Rosa Parks was fatigued of getting a poor return on her

investment in racial justice and human decency. She was not motivated by fear or anger, but by an unwavering desire, “to let it be known wherever we go that all of us should be free and equal and have all opportunities that others should have<sup>[3]</sup>.”

Most people are born with the qualities necessary to change the world around them. However, not everyone has the motivation, awareness, interest, or courage to become an agent of change, a “wounded warrior.” A wounded warrior demonstrates the personal courage to become “wounded” while speaking for change and has the conviction to put words into action. Mrs. Rosa Parks was and remains one of those individuals, a product of the times and her temperament.

Rosa Louise McCauley was born in Tuskegee, Alabama, on Feb. 4, 1913, and raised in Pine Level, Alabama by her maternal grandparents and her mother, Leona Edwards. At the dawn of the 20th century, living under Jim Crow in the segregated South was a terrifying, hellish place for Blacks. After Reconstruction (1865-1877), white supremacists felt it was necessary to restore white control of the government and to put Blacks (Negroes) back in their place. To be born Black in Alabama in 1913 meant that you were taught to be subservient to whites, expected to live in segregation, and feared that on any day, at any time, you could be killed, and your home could be bombed, burned, or destroyed.



Alabama was known as “the Cotton State,” the “Heart of Dixie,” and a rank-and-file member of the “Bible Belt.” It was the fourth state to secede from the United States in 1861 and pledge allegiance to the Constitution of the Confederate States of America. The Declaration of Secession from Alabama, along with most Southern slaveholding states, listed slavery as the primary reason for dissolution with the

United States. Its belief in political and economic hegemony, racial superiority, and religious authority was a driving motivator for the creation of systems of structural racism and segregation in religious, educational, and public settings. The entire ecology of Black people was totally ruled and regulated by white people, though at that time, almost one-half (45%) of the denizens of Alabama were enslaved Black people.

Using fear and intimidation, white men possessed and exercised ultimate hegemony over the life and death of Black bodies. Segregationist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, Red Shirts, or Knights of the White Camelia were created to oppress and subjugate Black people. Rebellion, resistance, and civil disobedience were typically met with direct and brutal punishment designed to thwart future attempts to change societal conditions. All attempts to change economic status and the living arrangements of Black people were met with extreme violence. White people were also given absolute autonomy to punish Blacks seeking freedom or rebelling against white authority.

On the evening of Dec. 1, 1995, the white bus driver, James Fred Blake, armed with a pistol and deputized with police powers, ordered Mrs. Parks to obey Chapter 6, Section 11, of the Montgomery City Code<sup>[4]</sup> and to yield her seat to a white man. Mrs. Parks refused. She would later recount:



I thought about my grandfather and the many nights he had to protect us (his family) from supremacist groups. I thought about the women before me, Aurelia Browder, Mary Louise Smith, Sarah Keys, and Claudette Colvin<sup>[5]</sup>, who refused to give up their seat to a white person. I thought about Emmett Till, and I couldn't go back (move to the back of the bus).

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.

Mrs. Parks believed, by standing and moving to another seat, she would be tacitly approving of the way she was being treated.

*“You must never be fearful about what you are doing when it is right.”*

Pushed to her limits, when asked to stand up and give up her seat, fully cognizant of the possible consequences of arrest, Mrs. Parks, simply replied, “No.”

Escorted off the bus by two additional officers, Mrs. Parks was arrested. Her arrest ignited a bus boycott and a civil rights movement. Called The First Lady of Civil Rights and the Mother of the Civil Rights Movement by the United States Congress<sup>[6]</sup>, the unplanned protest of Mrs. Rosa Parks, her deliberate act of defiance, has been acknowledged as one of the seminal events of the Civil Rights Movement.



But where did Mrs. Rosa Parks find the mettle and determination to sit in defiance of white supremacy? Other women, including Claudette Colvin, had been arrested, beaten, and humiliated for disobeying the law and resisting arrest. She refused to relinquish her seat because she had enough of being pushed around, treated inhumanely, and denied dignity and was determined to make that known she did not want to be treated that way.

Born in the nexus of our nation's ongoing struggle with overt racism, white supremacy, hegemonic sexism, and oppressive misogyny, Mrs. Parks had discovered — like Mrs. Isabella Baumfree (Sojourner Truth) and Mrs. Ida Bell Wells-Barnett before her —

valuable lessons about race, justice, and civil rights. Lessons like waiting for the benevolence of white folks to do the right thing was a waste of time, that believing in the process of “gradualism” would never lead to change for Black people, and that postponing confrontation as a strategy to obtain human and civil rights only provided opportunities for Black people to get rejected, hurt, or killed.

Rosa Parks' entire life had prepared her for that moment on Dec. 1, 1955. She professed, “From the time I was a child, I tried to protest against disrespectful treatment.” Motivated by her profound faith in God and the erudition of ancestors who refused to accept or give in to racism and injustice Rosa Parks realized intuitively what Fredrick Douglass believed and attempted to communicate in his 1857 West Indies Emancipation Speech:

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters.

This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will. Find out just what any people will quietly submit to, and you have found out the exact measure of injustice and wrong which will be imposed upon them, and these will continue till they are resisted with either words or blows, or with both. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.

Mrs. Parks lived a life of constant rebellion, always challenging any evidence of racism, social injustice, immorality, or indecency. Throughout her life, she resisted the systemic racism imbedded in Alabama and America.

She was not an accidental activist, nor was she an old woman whose feet were tired. Rosa Parks was born, “for such a time as this<sup>[7]</sup>,” equipped with the necessary temperament to combat racism, incivility, and injustice. Sylvester Edwards, her maternal grandfather, whose father was the son of his white slave owner, was enslaved from birth. He had personally experienced the horrors, hardships, and brutality of slavery. Mr. Edwards taught his granddaughter how to resist and respond to white people; ways to balance compliance with militancy. Rosa would share in one of her many interviews,

*“To bring about change, you must not be afraid to take the first step. We will fail when we fail to try.”*

Human agency, self-efficacy, and education in Black history were hallmark features within McCauley’s household. In fact, their home was filled with discussions centered on the accomplishments of Booker T. Washington, George Washington Carver, and Marcus Garvey. Rosa was instructed in survival strategies such as expressions of controlled anger and public comportment of happiness. She struggled with hypocrisy of white people and was intolerant of the pretense of Black people.

As an infant, she was chronically ill and suffered from tonsillitis for years. She finally received a tonsillectomy at nine, when her mother could afford to pay for the procedure. Though physically petite Rosa Parks’ temperament was audacious and brash. Faced with perceived threats of hurt, harm, or heightened anxiety, she seldom backed down from physical confrontations, emotionally stressful situations, or intense moral struggles. So deliberate was her opposition to white people’s sense of superiority, entitlement, and domination that her grandmother feared that Rosa would be lynched before she turned 20.

Religion, personal faith, and education were crucial to her personal development. She was a permanent member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AMEC) and was an active member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Though it follows Methodist traditions, the AMEC, founded by Richard Allen in 1816, distinguishes itself by concentrating on meeting the needs of people of African descent, establishing religious autonomy and with its commitment to civil right activism.

Mrs. Parks was intimately involved with the NAACP. From 1943-1956 she served as the Secretary of the Montgomery Chapter and the first secretary of the Alabama State Conference of the NAACP, the founder of the Youth Council, and an effective member during and after the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Parks and her husband



Raymond were heavily involved with the Scottsboro Boys<sup>[8]</sup>, raising funds to cover their legal expenses and sometimes hosting community meetings in their home.

Thursday, Dec. 1, 1955, Mrs. Rosa Louise McCauley Parks was arrested for disorderly conduct and violation of Chapter Six, Section 11 of the Montgomery City Code. She was convicted of these misdemeanors on Dec. 5, 1955, and ordered to pay \$10 in fines and \$4 in court costs. The Women's Political Council (WPC) along with prominent Black leaders, professionals, and clergy called for a one-day bus boycott. Ninety percent of the Black citizens of Montgomery, Alabama, did not ride the bus on Dec. 5. Later, the same day, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), organized by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., decided to continue the boycott until their austere demands of MIA were met. The MIA list of demands was initially denied.

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### **Montgomery Improvement Association Boycott Demands**

1. **Courteous treatment:** Bus operators should treat passengers with courtesy.
2. **First-come, first-served seating:** All passengers should be seated on a first-come, first-served basis.
3. **Black bus drivers:** African American bus drivers should be employed.

The bus boycott, originally planned for one day, was extended for 381 days. The economic impact on Montgomery Bus Lines was substantial, losing 30,000-40,000 fares per day. Over 381 days, at ten cents per day, the estimated loss in revenue was between \$1.143 million and \$1.524 million. The Montgomery Bus boycott, along with several other noteworthy events, have been credited as the catalyst of the Civil Rights Movement.

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*“I have learned over the years that when one’s mind is made up, this diminishes the fear; knowing what must be done does away with fear.”*

There was nothing romantic, quixotic, or magical about the Montgomery Bus boycott. After 381 days of not riding Montgomery Bus Lines, the United States Supreme Court ruled that racial segregation on bus lines in Alabama was illegal. For the Parks, it was 381 days of daily death threats, physical violence, hate mail, telephone harassments, and other acts of intimidation. Rosa and Raymond lost their jobs and struggled to meet their daily needs.

In the perception of various white communities of Alabama (political, educational, and social), Rosa Parks was an agitator, an instigator, and a troublemaker. Mrs. Parks was accused of being a communist because she attended workshops on nonviolence and labor rights at Highlander Folk School in Tennessee. During the red-baiting period of the U. S.– Soviet Union Cold War, Highlander Folk School and other organizations where civil rights activist met, were targeted by the defenders of democracy such as Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy. Given the extreme harassment experienced and fearful for their lives, Raymond and Rosa Parks decided to move to Detroit, Michigan. Mrs. Parks continued her activism being employed by Congressman John Conyers in his Detroit office until she retired in 1988.

It is important to dispel the fables and the folklore that shroud the true life of Rosa Parks. Mrs. Rosa McCauley Parks was born with an allergy to injustice, racism and white supremacy, and outright disrespect. Her innate allergic reaction was to fight back. Early in her childhood and practiced throughout her life, Mrs. Parks learned the grace of civility, to not be imprisoned by fear and intimidation, and to speak, without reservation, truth to power. When her Alabama environment



provided few Black female role models to emulate and fewer still, affinity groups, organizations, and institutions that would supply encouragement and support, she turned inward to find her faith in God and her belief in “freedom and justice for all.” Truly, Rosa Parks was traveling “the road less traveled.” Dr. Eddie Gaude, Jr., the James S. McDonnell Distinguished University Professor, Princeton University, would say that Rosa Parks, like Ms. Ella Baker, was the leader we have been looking for<sup>[9]</sup>. The reality is Rosa Louise McCauley Parks was the resolute leader America needed.

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### References

[1] Towfighi, J. Cyber Monday was the biggest US online shopping day ever. Cable News Network (CNN). December 3, 2024. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/12/03/business/cyber-monday-record-sales/index.html>

[2] Throughout much of this essay, Mrs. Rosa Parks, who was born on February 4, 1913, and married Mr. Raymond Parks on December 18, 1932, will be referred to as Mrs. Rosa Lousie McCauley Parks or Mrs. Rosa Parks. This reverence is bestowed upon Mrs. Parks, primarily because during Jim Crow, adult black women were seldom given the respect of honorifics before their names or as Dr. King wrote in his Letter from a Birmingham Jail: when your first name becomes "nigger" and your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and when your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs.,"

[3] Rosa Parks Interviews (1995). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqiQqM9nQoU>

[4] Montgomery City Code. Chapter 6. Section 11. Same- Powers of Persons in Charge of Vehicle; Person to Obey Directions. Any employee in charge of a bus operated in the city shall have the powers of a police officer of the city while in actual charge of any bus, for the purpose of carrying out the provisions of the preceding section, and it shall be unlawful for any passenger to refuse or fail to take a seat among those assigned to the race to which he belongs, at the request of any such employee in charge, if there is such a seat vacant. (Code 1938 ~ 604). [https://www.learner.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/RWD.HSSU5\\_CityCode.pdf](https://www.learner.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/RWD.HSSU5_CityCode.pdf)

[5] *Gayle v. Browder*. 352 US 903 (1956). The U.S. District Court ruled two-to-one, on June 5, 1956, that segregation on Alabama's intra state transportation system was unconstitutional. Four months earlier segregationists bombed Dr. King's home. The U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the decision on November 13, 1956. *Oyez*. Retrieved December 23, 2024, from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1956/342>

[6] Congressional Medal of Honor. On June 15, 1999, President Clinton awarded Rosa Parks the Congressional Gold Medal, the highest honor given by the U.S. legislative branch. Congresswoman Julia Carson (D-IN.), who introduced the legislation called Parks “the mother of the civil rights movement.” Retrieved on December 29, 2024 <https://www.loc.gov/exhibitions/rosa-parks-in-her-own-words/about-this-exhibition/a-life-of-global-impact/congressional-gold-medal/>

U.S. Representative Terri Sewell of Alabama's 7<sup>th</sup> District has presented H.R. 308. The Rosa Parks Day Act. The proposed legislation would make December 1<sup>st</sup> a federal holiday. Currently, there are no federal holidays that explicitly honor the contributions of women or a black woman.

[7] Esther 4: 14: If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?

[8] Scottsboro Boys – On March 25, 1931, nine African American teenagers were falsely accused of raping two white women aboard a Southern Railroad freight train in northern Alabama. Haywood Patterson, Olen Montgomery, Clarence Norris, Willie Roberson, Andy Wright, Ozzie Powell, Eugene Williams, Charley Weems, and Roy Wright were arrested. All were found guilty and sentenced to death except Ray Wright who received a mistrial because he was twelve years old.

[9] Gaude, Jr. E.S. (2024). We Are the Leaders We Have Been Looking For. Boston: Harvard University Press.

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