

Quiet Storm: The Defining Moment

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The “Mother of the Modern-Day Civil Rights Movement” entered into her earthly existence on February 4, 1913, in Tuskegee, Alabama in the United States (U.S.). She was none other than Rosa Louise McCauley the first child of James and Leona McCauley, a carpenter and a teacher. Little did Rosa know that she had come into a nation where she was not welcome. She was unaware that the color of her skin and not the content of her character determined her status in life. Also, she was unaware that her homeland had developed a system to purposely keep her and other Blacks ignorant and reaped with a feeling of inferiority. Nevertheless, with the strong family support provided by her mother and grandparents, Rosa developed into a God-fearing woman. She once said that “As a child, I learned from the Bible to trust in God and not be afraid”.¹ She also stated that she was influenced by her grandfather, who was a very proud man and a person who lacked fear, especially when it came to protecting his home and family.

Initially, Rosa was home schooled by her mother and later attended public schools.

She was forced to drop out of school to care for her sick grandmother and later her mother until their deaths. On December 18, 1932, she married Raymond Parks, a barber from Montgomery, Alabama and a member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Raymond was one of her strongest supporters. He encouraged her to complete high school when, at that time, very few Blacks had a high school diploma. She also succeeded in registering to vote.

In 1943, Rosa became active in the Civil Rights Movement by joining the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP. She accepted the position of secretary to the chapter president. She served in this position until 1957. In 1949, she became an adviser to the NAACP Youth Council.

As we reflect on the life of Rosa, it appears that she had been prepared from birth to take up the cross of the many civil rights warriors who fought for freedom before her. She acknowledged that she was not the only person fighting for freedom during the Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott. In fact, she recognized and gave credit to the



Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

civil rights warriors who came before her and those who existed during her life time. Some of the past warriors included Sojourner Truth (born Isabelle Baumfree), Harriet Ross Tubman, Ida B. Wells Barnett, W. E. B. Dubois, and Paul Robeson. Some warriors during her life time included Martin Luther King, Jr., Medgar Evers, and Malcolm X.

Throughout her life, Rosa was confronted with segregation, discrimination, and violence that consisted of open and unabashed lynching, rapes, killings, tortures, and brutalization of Blacks and, occasionally, some Whites who tried to help them. Between the 1950s and 1960s, many Blacks and Whites were tortured and murdered by members of white supremacy groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, White Citizens Council and other secret organizations. Oftentimes, federal, state, and local governments failed to inter-

vene and protect its citizens. Far worse, it was suspected that many government officials were members of the white supremacy groups.

One of the most brutal murders, and there were many, occurred during the summer of 1955. Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old black youth had traveled from Chicago to visit his uncle in Mississippi. Till was accused by some Southern whites of whistling at a white woman while shopping in a local grocery store. He was taken from his uncle's home, brutally beaten, and then lynched on August 28, 1955. Till's bloated and badly disfigured body was found in the Tallahatchie River. His body had been weighted down with a 75-pound cotton gin fan tied around his neck with barbed wire. Two individuals—Roy Bryant, the woman's husband, and J.W. Milam, his half-brother—admitted to the murder, but were found not guilty by an all-white, male jury. The jury acquitted the men of Till's murder because it concluded that the corpse pulled from the river was too mangled to be positively identified as Till's body. This murder was a horrified example of the danger, prejudice, and inequality blacks experienced in the South. It also became one of several rallying points for the Civil Rights Movement.

On May 4, 1961, an interracial group of young people, called Freedom Riders, boarded buses in Washington, D.C. that were destined for the South. The young people, under the auspices of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), had planned to travel through the South to enforce the law that segregated seating of interstate passengers on trains and buses and in terminals was unconstitutional. The trip was to end in New Orleans, Louisiana. Initially, when the Freedom Riders arrived in Anniston, Alabama they were met with mobs of angry

people. Later in Birmingham, Alabama, these young people were savagely beaten, stomped, and slashed with chains. Their buses were stoned and burned. Although the Freedom Riders did not make it to New Orleans as planned, they traveled through Virginia, North and South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi. Many of them were arrested and spent their summer in jail.

The murder of three civil rights martyrs—James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner—in 1964 near Meridian, Mississippi also showed the depth that some people would descend into during their savagery, beastly life to prove their supremacy. For instance, on June 21, 1964, Chaney (a 21-year-old black man) and two young white men (Goodman, 21, and Schwerner, 24) went to a neighboring town to visit a church that had been fire-bombed by the Ku Klux Klan. The men were arrested by a local sheriff on their way back to Meridian. After they were released, they were stopped again on a rural road where a white mob killed and buried them. Their bodies were found buried near Philadelphia, Mississippi on August 4, 1964.

Another well known murder involved Viola Gregg Liuzzo, a 39-year-old white, mother of five who was a civil rights worker from Detroit, Michigan. She had heard about Reverend Martin Luther King's planned protest march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama and wanted to participate. She was shot and killed on an Alabama highway halfway between Selma and Montgomery after the famous freedom march. Shortly after her death, four Ku Klux Klan members were arrested in connection with her murder. None of the four were convicted of the murder. Nevertheless, President Lyndon Baines Johnson, the 36th President of the U.S., declared "war on the

Klan, calling it a 'hooded society of bigots.'" Robert Shelton, Jr., the Imperial Wizard of the United Klans, at the time, responded to President Johnson's statement by calling him a "damn liar". Nevertheless, on March 30, 1965, the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities voted for a full investigation of Ku Klux Klan activities.

Rosa experienced the same humiliating and degrading conditions in Alabama as her neighbors. They faced signs that read "White Only" at water fountains, restrooms, restaurants, theaters, amusements parks, schools; and other public places where Blacks and Whites would come together. Nevertheless, she continued to seek her civil rights. On December 1, 1955, her day was not like a "walk in the park". She placed herself in a position where the most barbaric, ignorant; and sick people would be and who were prone to do her great bodily harm. Her past experiences with the actions and conduct of whites during this time more than justified the need for her and other Blacks to use extreme caution around them. Also, after all, her refusal to give up her seat to a white male passenger occurred almost 100 days after the brutal and senseless murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi.

On December 1, 1955, Rosa had completed her work day as a seamstress at a Montgomery department store. She went to the bus stop to await transportation home to the colored part of town. She was tired. When the bus arrived, she and other Blacks passengers entered the front door, paid their fares, exited, and re-entered through the back door to find their seats. As required by law, Rosa and the other Blacks sat in the back of the bus. Also, under existing law, Blacks passengers had to give up their seats and move further to the back or stand, if a white passenger entered the bus and wanted a seat.

Black passengers could not sit on the same row with white passengers or across the aisle from them. Although the Blacks were the majority riders on the public buses, they had to put up with these humiliating conditions.

On the evening of December 1st, a problem arose when a White male passenger got on the bus and was unable to find a seat in the White section. The bus driver ordered the Blacks on the row immediately after the White section to give up their seats. The bus drivers had police power under both municipal and state laws to enforce the law. Eventually, all Blacks on the row, with exception of Rosa, reluctantly gave up their seats and moved to the back of the bus. Rosa was tired! She was physically tired, as any person would be after a hard day at work receiving minimum pay of \$25.00 per week or \$5.00 per day. But on this day, Rosa was more than physically tired she was spiritually tired. The barbaric and racist actions imposed upon her by the state and city had gone past physical exhaustion. They had begun to invade her spiritual being.

Later in life, Rosa referred to the details leading up to her decision not to give up her seat and how faith played a role in her life as a “Quiet Strength”. However, upon a moment of reflection, there was not only a quiet strength in Rosa but a “Quiet Storm”, which accounted for her being able to stand so tall while sitting down. The quiet storm and her action—of not giving up her seat—ignited the Modern-Day Civil Rights Movement. As a result of her arrest, we find the Quiet Storm escalated into a form of unity that surpassed all understanding. It was through unity that Blacks in Montgomery, Alabama were able to successfully boycott the city’s bus system, beginning December 5, 1955. It was painful for Blacks to walk mile after mile, crowd into each oth-

ers cars for 381 days, and see their churches and homes fire bombed, but, in the end, it was worth it. The Montgomery bus company lost money and segregation on public transportation was abolished.

After her arrest, Rosa increased her fight for civil rights but suffered hardships as a result. She could not find work. So, she and her husband found it necessary to leave Alabama to find employment. Nevertheless, in 1965, U. S. Congressman John Conyers stood tall and hired Rosa to work for him as a secretary in his Detroit congressional office. She continued to work there until she retired in 1988.

As the sun began to set in her life, Rosa received many honors and degrees. In 1996, she received one of her greatest honors when President William (“Bill”) Clinton, presented her with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Three years later, in 1999, she received the U. S. Congressional Gold Medal of Honor. The last honor bestowed upon her was after her death, in 2005, when the U.S. Senate allowed her body to lie in state in the United States Capitol Rotunda. Generally, this honor is reserved for presidents and former presidents. She was the first woman to be given such an honor, which was so appropriate before she returned from whence she came.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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