

**June 14, 2020**  
**“Surprised By Hope”**  
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I wanted to share with you a time recently when I was surprised by hope.

This gift of hope, like so many gifts I receive, came from a group of students. One of the nice things we do at Central High School, where I teach, is to offer open symposium days where both teachers and students can freely offer and attend workshops on whatever interests them. On our last Symposium day, I offered a session focused on the concept of intersectionality; this was a bit of a preview for the Women and Gender Studies class I hope to teach again this fall. The session had an average attendance—around nine or 10 students who were freshmen and sophomore girls.

The concept of intersectionality refers to when someone sits, and very much suffers, at the crossroads of multiple oppressions. A very good example of this would be Dr. Pauli Murray who was an African American woman and lesbian Civil Rights activist. People who are forced to live under multiple oppressions, at least in terms of the historical record, tend to be silenced and forgotten (hence few of us recognize the name Pauli Murray) or to have their lives and legacies really distorted or cut down.

Another poignant instance of being forgotten centers on a very active group of African American women—the Women's Political Caucus—of Montgomery, Alabama, in the 1950s. It was very much these women who were the catalysts, the brains and the brawn behind the Montgomery Bus Boycott. At the point at which Martin Luther King Jr. got involved, and to that point King was relatively unknown, the boycott was already underway. And it was, in fact, the Montgomery Bus Boycott that catapulted King into national prominence. (Please know this is no way intended to take anything away from the prophetic, erudite, visionary, powerful and extraordinary human being that King was.)

The women of the Women's Political Caucus, most notably a teacher named Joanne Robinson, were already prepared. They had a plan; they knew how they were going to create thousands of flyers, with Joanne Robinson cranking them out overnight, one by one, on a mimeo machine—and volunteers to distribute them to African Americans across the city.

At some point, the Women's Political Caucus joined forces with E.D. Nixon and the local NAACP. The secretary of that NAACP branch was none other than Rosa Parks. But Rosa Parks was not the first woman to refuse to give up her seat on a Montgomery Bus, nor was she the first woman the Women's Political Caucus wanted to use to springboard the boycott that they had already been threatening. The first one was actually

Claudette Colvin, but because Colvin was a pregnant and unmarried teenager, E.D. Nixon counseled against it, and so they went back to what they had been doing, which was trying to negotiate with the bus company and gathering signatures for petitions.

And then came the fateful day. Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat was, as the myth tells it, spontaneous. But Rosa Parks' decision had little to do with being *suddenly* fed up. It instead had everything to do with her having been a trained, experienced and long-long-term activist. It's worth hearing what she had to say about it: "I was so involved with the attempt to bring about freedom from this kind of thing. I was resigned to give what I could to protest against the way I was being treated, and I felt that all of our meeting, trying to negotiate and to bring petitions before the authorities really hadn't done any good at all."

So, when the moment came for her to commit what she knew was an act of civil disobedience, Rosa Parks seized it. As I was writing this, it occurred to me that a pattern is suggested here: the women wanting to be bold—the women of the Women's Political Caucus, Claudette Colvin, Rosa Parks—while the men counseled caution.

Rosa Parks, though, did take the initiative, Joanne Robinson did stay up all night to crank out the flyers, the boycott began, and, as most historians construe it, the Civil Rights Movement was born. Fair enough: a very plausible assertion.

But, there is a great deal more to the story, and a great deal more to Rosa Parks—events and activism that was happening not in the 1950s, but in the 1940s—than most of us know. The activism that Rosa Parks was engaged in during the 1940s was, in fact, far, far more dangerous than what she did in Montgomery that day in 1955. And despite all of my fancy graduate school education, and despite the fact that I have been teaching African American history for many years, I just learned about this a few years ago. And the full Rosa Parks story is completely absent from the very well-respected, college-level textbook we use in the School District of Philadelphia.

In the 1940s Rosa Parks, starting with the abduction and rape of an African American woman named Recy Taylor by a car-full of white men, was the NAACP's principal investigator for these tragically common crimes against African American women by white men. While Rosa Parks was interviewing Recy Taylor, the local sheriff, in an effort to intimidate her, drove back and forth in front of Taylor's home. When Parks ignored him and continued with the interview, he burst in, threatened her and insisted she leave the area. Undaunted, Rosa Parks began the Committee For Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor; she and the committee flooded the South with flyers about Taylor and the many African American women victims whose lives were shattered and who saw absolutely no justice. They and Parks individually wrote letters to Alabama officials urging that the men be prosecuted. They also initiated an information campaign among African

American newspapers across the country about the utter lack of legal consequences these white rapists faced and demanding they be brought to justice. Of course, we have to believe that some of the rapists were themselves law enforcement officials. To fully understand how extraordinarily brave this open activism was, we must remember that more than 300 people were lynched in Alabama during The Jim Crow era (and some of them were women), yet Rosa Parks continued very much as the campaign's most recognizable voice and name.

So, all of this—a decade of dangerous activism over crimes against women far more brutal than the segregation of a bus—still goes largely untold. Extraordinary isn't it? It would certainly be interesting to puzzle out why this history has been denied, been covered over, been forgotten. Given time, I am sure we could do that. But what I have been most puzzled by is why the girls who attended my session found this, and a similar story I told about LatinX activist, Dolores Huerta, not just captivating but actually hopeful. And they did; I keep getting emails from them asking for more—for more stories like this one. Why? This hardly seems like the stuff of hope.

And so I am left to wonder: what difference would it make if the story of the past—the received history that we as adults have living in our minds? What if that story was not just one, albeit true, story of bleak and horrific victimization, but instead a text of many stories of extraordinary, but common heroism? We have to know there were, and are, thousands of women (and men and boys and girls) like Joanne Robinson and—let's say it out—the *anti-rape*, anti-racism activist, Rosa Parks, that we do not know.

And what difference would it make if we carried in our mind and hearts a story not just of rare leaders, but one chock-full, just teeming, with everyday brave men, women, girls and boys and the absolute multitude of brave acts they committed over a lifetime.

It would be a story full of streets that were themselves full of people fighting back, and doing so over and over again. I think this is the story—this complex, beautiful, detailed story of *stories*—that the students in my session are trying to build for themselves. And I have to wonder what we would be like if we carried such a story of stories within us: How much more hopeful would we be? How much more would we expect such an inspiring and energizing hope from everyone around us? And how much more willing would we be to step out, as Rosa Parks did, across our full lifespans to fight for justice, to constantly fight sexism, racism, police brutality, poverty and violence, and to fully fight for the enduring life of the exquisite gift that is of our planet?

May it be so.

As we leave this place, may we once again go wrapped in a rich tapestry of love, and inspired by stories of hope, act with great compassion and a stubborn, unflinching will for justice.