

FROM NATURAL RESOURCES

Adrienne Rich

... My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
so much has been destroyed

I have to cast my lot with those  
who age after age, perversely,  
with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world.

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Excerpted from "Natural Resources," in *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950-2001* by Adrienne Rich (W. W. Norton, 2002).

HOW HAVE YOU SPENT YOUR LIFE?

Jalaluddin Rumi

On Resurrection Day God will ask,  
"During this reprieve I gave you,  
what have you produced for Me?  
Through what work have you reached your  
life's end?  
For what end have you food  
and your strength been consumed?  
Where have you dimmed the luster of your eye?  
Where have you dissipated your five senses?  
You have spent your seeing, hearing,  
intelligence  
and the pure celestial substances;  
what have you purchased from the earth?  
I gave you hands and feet as spade and mattock  
for tilling the soil of good works;  
when did they by themselves become existent?"

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Jalaluddin Rumi was a thirteenth-century Sufi poet. From *The Pocket Rumi Reader*, translated and edited by Kabir Helminski (Shambhala Press, 2001). The poem originally appeared in Rumi's great work, the six-volume *Mathnawi*. Other books by Rumi include *The Rumi Collection*, translated and edited by Kabir Helminski (Shambhala Press, 2000).

avored an end to segregation, the black community was simply being too impatient. King said he'd almost come to believe that the greatest stumbling block toward freedom was "not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice." Underscoring one of the common ways that democracy is undermined, he warned, "We will have to repent not merely for the vitriolic words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people."

A comparable silence pervades American society today, as immensely destructive actions proceed with the tacit acceptance of the mainstream media and of far too many elected officials and civic and cultural leaders. They encourage the view that it's best to defer action until conditions are perfect, as King's critics had urged. They say that we shouldn't take action because we don't know enough or aren't powerful enough, or the process of raising controversial issues isn't likely to be effective anyway. But as King writes, "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability." It comes instead through tenacious, step-by-step effort without which "time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation." By virtue of such work, we redeem ourselves as well as "reconstitute the world," to borrow Adrienne Rich's words.

The historical moment that first called King to his mission was the Montgomery bus boycott. According to the prevailing myth, it all started when Rosa Parks appeared out of nowhere, too tired to move, as people of color were expected to do, to the back of the bus. In "The Real Rosa Parks," I explore how this cartoon version of history obscures key elements of Parks's journey, including her own history of engagement and the support and guidance she received from an existing activist community. Like other movement participants, Rosa Parks took a decisive moral stand to affirm her own humanity. But she didn't make that choice within a social vacuum. No one ever does. Like her,

There's a paradox of living with a sense of responsibility to our communities: The first and most enduring measure of success is what we see in the mirror at the end of each day. Have we displayed integrity? Have we done our best to serve the truth? All efforts to change the world—or, more realistically, small parts of it—spring from a fundamental respect for the dignity of human beings, starting with our own sense of self, then expanding to encompass everyone else. But without the first, the second is impossible. Hope, Tony Kushner says, is "a moral obligation, a human obligation, an obligation to the cells in your body. . . . Hope is not naïve, hope grapples endlessly with despair. Real, vivid, powerful, thunderclap hope, like the soul, is at home in darkness, is divided; but lose your hope and you lose your soul." To that I would add, lose your soul and you lose the stubbornness of will that's necessary to sustain a commitment to freedom and justice. To betray oneself is to betray humanity—and vice versa.

In "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Martin Luther King, Jr., offers a classic example of this moral equation as he reflects on the deep personal cost of ignoring, obscuring, or excusing the suffering of our fellow human beings. What makes King's words so powerful, and worth reading and rereading, is his challenge to the white moderates, ministers of ostensible goodwill who'd explained, in public statements, that although they personally

we can reclaim our dignity most powerfully by acting in concert with others.

Although the civil rights movement ended legal segregation, African American communities still suffer poverty and neglect. And the sense of shared destiny that once motivated resistance to injustice has eroded. In "Prisoners of Hope," Cornel West meditates on this spiritual corrosion. If we don't offer an alternative, West warns, the resulting rage and bitterness will keep tearing society apart. But change won't be easy or swift. In a time when those who seek more justice must, by necessity, be "stepping out on nothing, hoping to land on something," West challenges us to look squarely at the ills of the world while not letting them overwhelm us. "To live is to wrestle with despair," he writes, "yet never to allow despair to have the last word."

King, Parks, and West were raised in engaged religious traditions that provide transcendent frameworks for social commitment. Whatever occurs in the everyday world, in other words, they and others like them can rely for moral support on an infinitely patient and benevolent God. Even while taking the most difficult stands, they can feel lifted by God's arms. Many also carry a faith in the inevitable triumph of good over evil, however long it may take. In King's eloquent words, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Those whose basic outlook is secular, by contrast, can't appeal to eternity or inevitability. They turn to history, culture, and nature to connect with something larger than themselves. Like those steeped in explicit faith traditions, they take heart from movements for justice that began long before them and will continue long after they're gone. They draw strength from the flow of a river or the flight of an eagle, from communion with the variety, flux, and sweep of life. They resist succumbing to fear and doubt and they find the strength to act with courage and compassion by always trying to keep in mind those who will

inherit the world they have created. But they don't live with an equivalent promise that justice will necessarily prevail.

Whether our sources of strength are religious or secular, we all live in a society in which troubling social ills are ignored, idealism is denigrated, and citizens are generally discouraged from reflecting upon, debating, and taking action to check the excesses of the powerful and to remedy the plight of the powerless. Shortly after September 11, 2001, a letter to my local Seattle paper encouraged readers to "be patriotic. Go out and buy a sofa." Following a commander in chief who promoted national salvation through patriotic consumption, the writer envisioned the shopping mall as our democracy's front line of defense. Carla Seaquist offers an opposite perspective in "Behemoth in a Barhobe," a dialogue between the still small voice of conscience and an American psyche walled off from reality by material distractions. Echoing Arthur Waskow's Sukkot essay, Seaquist advises that we respond to a post-September 11 world by acknowledging our vulnerability, which will be eased only through justice. Denying this vulnerability is resignation disguised as realism.

Such resignation betrays not only our integrity but also that of generations to come. Hope, Wendell Berry says, is "one of our duties . . . part of our obligation to our own being and to our descendants." By the same token, the absence of hope creates what psychologist Robert Jay Lifton calls "the broken connection," which applies not only to the link between past, present, and future but also to the ties between personal life and the larger common world. One of the most impressive examples of repairing that connection is the story of Billy Wayne Sinclair, who's been in Louisiana's Angola Prison for thirty-seven years. Serving a life sentence for killing a convenience store clerk, Sinclair was offered the chance to buy his freedom for \$15,000 in a pardon-selling scheme. He seriously considered the opportunity, as others had already paid and been

released. But he'd spent half his life struggling to become, as he puts it, a "moral man," and finally had been able to "see someone other than a 'convicted murderer' in the mirror." So Sinclair went to the FBI. The corrupt Pardon Board chair is now in jail, as is the crooked governor who appointed him. But still Sinclair remains in prison, isolated in protective custody, punished extra for blowing the whistle.

Sinclair redeemed not only himself but, in part, the brutal world he inhabited. In addition to exposing the bribery scandal, he helped integrate the prison and edited *The Angolize*, a pioneering, nationally recognized inmate newspaper. Those with far more freedom and latitude for action would be proud to have attempted a fraction of his accomplishments. He found a way, under the most discouraging circumstances, of "replacing fear with truth," in the terms of Peter Ackerman and Jack DuVall.

In "Resisting Terror," Ackerman and DuVall describe astounding, yet largely unknown, instances of radical dignity in the most terrifying and daunting situations. They tell how the nonviolent resistance of the "Mothers of the Disappeared" helped overthrow a murderous Argentinean dictatorship. They also recount the courageous acts of non-Jewish women in Berlin, under Hitler, whose Jewish husbands had been arrested. The women gathered outside the police station and stayed until their loved ones—including some men already sent to Auschwitz—were freed. Their love was stronger than the real threats of torture and death. "Resisting Terror" highlights the transformative power of ordinary women and men who assert their dignity, even in contexts where action seems unthinkable. Their stories, seldom told, cannot help but give us heart. If they can take a stand, persist, and prevail, so can we.

#### CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

## Letter from Birmingham Jail

*Martin Luther King, Jr.*

While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities "unwise and untimely." You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being.

Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct action movement that was "well timed," according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly. For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has almost always meant "Never." We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied."

I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your 20 million Negro brothers smothering in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when

you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are), and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of despair.

I must confess that over the last few years I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens' Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your

methods of direct action"; who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice, and that when they fail to do this they become dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is merely a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, where the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substance-filled positive peace, where all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive. We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with.

I had also hoped that the white moderate would reject the myth of time. I received a letter this morning from a white brother in Texas which said: "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great of a religious hurry. It has taken Christianity almost 2,000 years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to Earth." All that is said here grows out of a tragic misconception of time. It is the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. I am coming to feel that the people of ill will have used time much more effectively than the people of goodwill. We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic

words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and persistent work of men willing to be co-workers with God, and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the forces of social stagnation. We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

Now [our] approach is being dismissed as extremist. I must admit that I was initially disappointed in being so categorized. But as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist for love—"Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice—"Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ—"I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin Luther an extremist—"Here I stand; I can do none other so help me God." Was not John Bunyan an extremist—"I will stay in jail to the end of my days before I make a butchery of my conscience." Was not Abraham Lincoln an extremist—"This nation cannot survive half slave and half free." Was not Thomas Jefferson an extremist—"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice—or will we be extremists for the cause of justice? In that dramatic scene on Calvary's hill, three men were crucified. We must not forget that all three were crucified

for the same crime—the crime of extremism. Two were extremists for immorality, and thus fell below their environment. The other, Jesus Christ, was an extremist for love, truth, and goodness, and thereby rose above his environment. So, after all, maybe the South, the nation, and the world are in dire need of creative extremists.

I had hoped that the white moderate would see this. Maybe I was too optimistic. Maybe I expected too much. I guess I should have realized that few members of a race that has oppressed another race can understand or appreciate the deep groans and passionate yearnings of those that have been oppressed and still fewer have the vision to see that injustice must be rooted out by strong, persistent, and determined action. I am thankful, however, that some of our white brothers have grasped the meaning of this social revolution and committed themselves to it. They are still all too small in quantity, but they are big in quality. Some like Ralph McGill, Lillian Smith, Harry Golden, and James Dabbs have written about our struggle in eloquent, prophetic, and understanding terms. Others have marched with us down nameless streets of the South. They have languished in filthy roach-infested jails, suffering the abuse and brutality of angry policemen who see them as "dirty nigger lovers." They, unlike so many of their moderate brothers and sisters, have recognized the urgency of the moment and sensed the need for powerful "action" antidotes to combat the disease of segregation.

In spite of my shattered dreams of the past, I came to Birmingham with the hope that the white religious leadership of this community would see the justice of our cause, and with deep moral concern, serve as the channel through which our just grievances would get to the power structure. I had hoped that each of you would understand. But again I have been disappointed. I have heard numerous religious leaders of the South call upon their worshippers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear

white ministers say, "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard so many ministers say, "Those are social issues with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched so many churches commit themselves to a completely other-worldly religion which made a strange distinction between body and soul, the sacred and the secular.

There was a time when the church was very powerful. It was during that period when the early Christians rejoiced when they were deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town the power structure got disturbed and immediately sought to convict them for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But they went on with the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," and had to obey God rather than man. They were small in number but big in commitment. They were too God-intoxicated to be "astronomically intimidated." They brought an end to such ancient evils as infanticide and gladiatorial contest.

Things are different now. The contemporary church is often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent and often vocal sanction of things as they are.

But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are presently misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in

Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. Before the pilgrims landed at Plymouth, we were here. Before the pen of Jefferson etched across the pages of history the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence, we were here. For more than two centuries our fore-parents labored in this country without wages; they made cotton king; and they built the homes of their masters in the midst of brutal injustice and shameful humiliation—and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to thrive and develop. If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we now face will surely fail.

One day the South will recognize its real heroes. They will be the James Merediths, courageously and with a majestic sense of purpose, facing jeering and hostile mobs and with the agonizing loneliness that characterizes the life of the pioneer. They will be old oppressed, battered Negro women, symbolized in a seventy-two-year-old woman of Montgomery, Alabama, who rose up with a sense of dignity and with her people decided not to ride the segregated buses, and responded to one who inquired about her tiredness with ungrammatical profundity, "My feet is tired, but my soul is rested." They will be the young high school and college students, young ministers of the gospel and a host of their elders courageously and nonviolently sitting-in at lunch counters and willingly going to jail for conscience's sake. One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters they were in reality standing up for the best in the American dream and the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, and thusly, carrying our whole nation back to those great wells of democracy.

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Excerpted from "Letter from Birmingham Jail." The full text can be found in James Washington, editor, *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Harper San Francisco, 2003).

## 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 suitcases 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.

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

Yet most of our fellow citizens deny this black despair, downplay this black rage, and blind themselves to the omens in our midst. So now, as in the past, we prisoners of hope in desperate times must try to speak our fallible truths, expose the vicious lies, and bear our imperfect witness.

In 1946, when the great Eugene O'Neill's play *The Iceman Cometh* was produced, he said America was the greatest example of a country that exemplifies the biblical question, "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world but lose his own soul?" Artists like Harry Belafonte and John Coltrane and Toni Morrison and others have been asking the same question, as the young people say, "How do we keep it real?"

When we look closely at jazz, or the blues, for example, we see a profound sense of the tragic linked to human agency. This music does not wallow in a cynicism or a paralyzing pessimism, but it also is realistic enough not to project excessive utopia. It responds in an improvisational, undogmatic, creative way to circumstances, helping people still survive and thrive.

How can we be realistic about what this nation is about and still sustain hope, acknowledging that we're up against so much? When I talk to young people these days, there's a sense in which they're in an anti-idealist mode and mood. They want to keep it real. And keeping it real means, in fact, understanding that the white supremacy you thought you could push back permeates every nook and cranny of this nation so deeply that you ought to wake up and recognize how deep it is.

That to me is a very serious challenge. If we were to go back to 1965, and say, put a few black faces in high places, and think that somehow the problem was going to be solved, today's young women and men would say to us, "Don't you realize how naïve that is?" They wouldn't say that in the form, "We are victims." They'd be saying, "We're going to get around that some way, but it's not going to be the way you think. We're going to

get around it the way most American elites have, by hustling, by stepping outside the law, by shaping the law in our interest, and so forth." And people say, "Oh, but that's rather downbeat talk, isn't it? That's not very hopeful." And the young people say, "Well, the level of hope is based on the reality."

Now, what do we say back to them? Part of my response has to do with a certain kind of appeal to their moral sense. Part of it has to do with their connection to a tradition, from grandmother to grandfather to father to mother, that has told them it is often better to be right and moral as opposed to being simply successful in the cheapest sense. And yet we all know that there must be some victories, some successes, if we're going to keep alive this tradition and the legacy of King, Harry Belafonte, Paul Robeson, and others. To convince them that what we're talking about is real, what do we say? This is what I struggle with every day.

I think that rage is an understandable and appropriate response to an absurd situation, namely, black people facing white supremacist power and hegemony. The question becomes, "How do you channel the rage?" Because it's going to come out. It's going to be manifest in some way. Too often it's manifested in cowardly ways not guided by political consciousness, in self-destructive ways, like physical violence. Malcolm X's great insight, among many, was that we need to have some moral channels through which this rage can flow. Malcolm wasn't the only one who pointed this out; he learned it from Elijah Muhammad and Marcus Garvey and others. We also get it from other traditions, from King and A. Philip Randolph. This rage needs some targeting and direction. It has to reflect a broad moral vision, a sharp political analysis of wealth and power. Most important, it's got to be backed up with courage and follow-through.

When there's a paucity of courage and follow-through, you can have the broadest vision and the most sophisticated analysis

in the world, and it's still sounding brass and tinkling cymbals. It's empty, if you don't have follow-through. Again this is where young people have so much to teach us. Because when they say, "Make it real," in part they're saying they want to see a sermon, not hear one. They want an example. They want to be able to perceive in palpable concrete form how these channels will allow them to vent their rage constructively and make sure that it will have an impact. What Malcolm, I think, was able to perceive is: Look, we're going to have to deal with black rage one way or another. Let's at least try to channel it.

The country is in deep trouble. We've forgotten that a rich life consists fundamentally of serving others, trying to leave the world a little better than you found it. This is true at the personal level. But there's also a political version, which has to do with what you see when you get up in the morning and look in the mirror and ask yourself whether you are simply wasting your time on the planet or spending it in an enriching manner.

We need a moral prophetic minority of all colors who muster the courage to question the powers that be, the courage to be impatient with evil and patient with people, and the courage to fight for social justice. In many instances we will be stepping out on nothing, hoping to land on something. That's the history of black folks in the past and present, and of those of us who value history and struggle. Our courage rests on a deep democratic vision of a better world that lures us and a blood-drenched hope that sustains us.

This hope is not the same as optimism. Optimism adopts the role of the spectator who surveys the evidence in order to infer that things are going to get better. Yet we know that the evidence does not look good. The dominant tendencies of our day are unregulated global capitalism, racial balkanization, social breakdown, and individual depression. Hope enacts the stance of the participant who actively struggles against the evidence in order to change the deadly tides of wealth inequality, group

xenophobia, and personal despair. Only a new wave of vision, courage, and hope can keep us sane—and preserve the decency and dignity requisite to revitalize our organizational energy for the work to be done. To live is to wrestle with despair yet never to allow despair to have the last word.

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