

SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT: THE MYTH OF “ROSA PARKS THE TIRED”

Many of us teach about Rosa Parks and the Montgomery Bus Boycott, either around the time of Martin Luther King Jr’s birthday, or in a separate Civil Rights unit. In an article, excerpted below, educator and author Herbert Kohl points out that we often present an overly simplistic picture of the events surrounding the boycott and that, in doing so, we belittle the people involved and the significance of their act. I have taken the seven points Kohl includes as part of what he calls the “generic” Rosa Parks story, and summarized his analysis of each of them.

- 1. Rosa Parks was a poor seamstress. She lived in Montgomery, Alabama during the 1950s. Park’s work as a seamstress was secondary to her community and political involvement. She was one of the first women in Montgomery to join the NAACP, and she was well known in the African American community of Montgomery for her opposition to segregation, her leadership abilities and her moral strength. Since the 1954 Supreme Court decision in Brown vs. the Board of Education, she had been actively working on the desegregation of Montgomery’s schools.*
- 2. In those days there still was segregation in parts of the United States. That meant that African Americans and European Americans were not allowed to use the same facilities. Placing segregation in the past is one way to avoid dealing with its current manifestations and to imply that racism is no longer a major problem. Describing integration passively (“...there was still segregation...”) avoids the fact that segregation was legal and that Mrs. Parks was arrested for violating Alabama state laws that institutionalized segregation. By saying, “African Americans and European Americans were not allowed...,” we are equating the treatment of African Americans and European Americans under the laws, rather than acknowledging the pervasiveness and totality of segregation in the pre-civil rights South.*
- 3. When it was crowded on the city buses African Americans had to give up seats in front to European Americans and move to the back of the bus. This is not straight forward enough and does not give a strong enough picture of the harshness of these laws.*
- 4. One day on her way home from work, Rosa was tired and sat down in the front of the bus. To stress her being tired is a way of saying that her defiance of segregation was an accident, merely the result of her fatigue and mood on that particular day. There are also inaccuracies. She did not sit in the front of the bus; she sat in the first row of the “colored” section. When the bus got crowded, she refused to give up her seat to a white person as the law required. Kohl also points out that we often refer to historical characters by their first names, which, in this case, perpetuates the lack of respect with which Blacks were treated. He suggests that a more respectful way of referring to her would be “Rosa Parks.”*

5. *As the bus got crowded she was asked to give up her seat to a European American man and she refused.* The bus driver told her she had to go to the back of the bus and she still refused to move. It was a hot day and she was tired and angry, and became very stubborn. The driver called a policeman who arrested Rosa. This is the way Rosa Parks herself described her experiences with buses: “I had problems with bus drivers over the years because I didn’t see fit to pay my money in the front and then go around to the back. Sometimes bus drivers wouldn’t permit me to get on the bus, and I had been evicted from the bus. One of the things that made this [time] get so much publicity was the fact that the police were called in and I was placed under arrest. See, if I had just been evicted from the bus and he hadn’t placed me under arrest, it probably could have been just another incident.” Kohl adds that Rosa Parks acted with clear understanding and resolve. She knew what she was doing, understood the consequences and was prepared to confront segregation head on and at great personal sacrifice.

6. *When other African Americans in Montgomery heard this they became angry too, so they decided to refuse to ride the buses until everyone was allowed to ride together.* They boycotted the buses. In actuality, rather than being a spontaneous act of community support, the boycott had been planned before Rosa Parks was arrested. African American leaders had been waiting for the right person and the right event to spark the boycott. They wanted someone who had the respect of the community and the personal strength to deal with a racist police force and nasty publicity that was sure to follow. In addition, Kohl points out that Rosa Parks was not the first to refuse to move her seat, nor the first to be arrested. The community had resolved to conduct the boycott “when the time was ripe and the people were ready.” Kohl points out that this is a story of “collective decision-making, willed risk and coordinated action” that is far more dramatic and educational than the story of a tired frustrated individual who acted without a sense of history and role.

7. *The boycott, which was led by Martin Luther King, Jr., succeeded. Now African Americans and European Americans and European Americans can ride the buses together in Montgomery.* Rosa Parks was a very brave person. Actually, King was a new member of the community and was, at first, reluctant to take a leadership position; he agreed to do so at the request of the community leaders. Kohl also feels it should be pointed out that the boycott lasted for over a year, 381 days to be exact, causing considerable inconvenience and discomfort to the community. Some people walked miles to work; other rode bikes or shared rides. This was a concerted effort by a determined community willing to take great risks to make democracy live.