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Trouble's Clarion Call for Leaders: Jo Ann Robinson and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

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Cover Page Footnote

1 Rosa Parks had been put off a Montgomery city bus back in 1943 for boarding at the front rather than the rear (Parks, 1996, p. 13). 2 Rosa Parks at the time of her arrest was serving as the secretary and a youth worker in the NAACP's Montgomery branch (Keller & Reuther, 2006, p. 1090). 3 Varying historical accounts have Robinson calling Nixon, or Abernathy calling Robinson based on a call from Nixon. Based on the detail of Robinson's account, it seems odd she would omit mentioning a call from Nixon if it did occur. Thornton, however, in his book, *Dividing Lines*, states that Robinson essentially took the matter out of Nixon's hands (Thornton, 2002, p. 61). 4 Dr. Trenholm did not participate publicly in the boycott; he did, however, serve on the board with city and bus officials to help end the boycott (Robinson, 1987). 5 Mr. Nixon claimed that on December 2, 1955, he personally gave a copy Mrs. Robinson's leaflet to Joe Azbell, a white reporter for the *Montgomery Advertiser*, with the comment, "I've got a big story for you" (Gaillard, 2004, p. 11). Thornton points out that, "the memory of each participant has necessarily been shaped to some extent by his or her knowledge of and reaction to subsequent events. In the final analysis, the historian must ground his or her judgment in the sense one derives from the contemporary documents" (Thornton, 2002, p. 606, n101). 6 "In Montgomery, the long-standing hatred between Edgar Nixon and the working-class blacks of west Montgomery on the one hand and Rufus Lewis and the middle-class blacks connected with Alabama State College on the other had for more than a decade before the beginning of the bus boycott made black unity exceedingly difficult to achieve" (Thornton, 2002, p. 13). The selection of the new minister, Dr. King, as minister may have been the only workable solution. 7 The MIA was pledged to "protect, defend, encourage, enlighten, and assist the members of the black community against unfair treatment, prejudice and unacceptable subordination . . . [and] to keep down violence, to make Christian-like, and to follow the 'passive resistance doctrine' of non-violence" (Robinson, 1987, p. 64). 8 Dr. King had noted three major problems in the Negro community of Montgomery which must be remedied before true social progress could be made: 1) lack of unity among leaders; 2) a community crippled by the indifference of the educated group; and 3) apparent apathy of Negro ministers when presented with social problems (King, p. 34-35).

Trouble's Clarion Call for Leaders: Jo Ann Robinson and the Montgomery Bus Boycott

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Abstract

Turbulent times are part of the human experience. They provide what Useem calls the “leadership moment” when one is given the opportunity to define who one is (1998). For Jo Ann Robinson, that leadership moment came personally in 1949, and publicly in 1955, when she transformed her trauma into a pro-social action of change (Williams & Allen, 2015). This article is a historical narrative inquiry into the life of Robinson who launched the Montgomery boycott and helped start the civil rights movement. The article tells the rest of the story beyond Parks and King, and explores the question: How did Robinson lead? With no authority, she empowered more than 50,000 African Americans to stand up and change their world.

Introduction

Troubles, trials, trauma, and tragedy – these are the realities of life as a human being. These turbulent times often showcase the worst in mankind, but there is another side. These same challenging moments can call forth the best in mankind, becoming the womb of leadership where would-be leaders choose to emerge. These times are, as Abigail Adams stated, the qualities, which “wake into life and form the character of the hero and the statesman” (Adams, 1780). They are what Michael Useem refers to as the “leadership moment” – a moment in a life when one is given the opportunity to define who one really is authentically, at the core (1998).

Montgomery, Alabama provided that leadership moment for Jo Ann Robinson personally in 1949 and then publicly in 1955 to transform her traumatic experience into a pro-social action of change (Williams & Allen, 2015). Her action allowed her to help inspire more than 50,000 blacks to boycott the Montgomery’s bus line for the stated goal of protecting their rights and launching the civil rights movement. “Negroes have rights, too” (Robinson, 1987, pp. 45-46). This article is a historical narrative inquiry into the life of Jo Ann Robinson, the unknown leader of the Montgomery bus boycott, who helped provide the platform for a youthful Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to capture the attention of a nation, and launch the civil rights movement. The article explores the question: How did Robinson lead? In an era when women, especially African American women, did not lead, how did this woman rise to the challenge, embrace the crisis in her community, and empower over 50,000 African Americans to stand up for themselves?

For the purpose of this study, leadership will be defined using a definition built on that of James MacGregor Burns and modified by Donald Phillips: “Leadership is leaders acting – as well as caring, inspiring, and persuading others to act” (1998, p. 23). True leadership involves taking action – caring about one another, inspiring each other to become their

better selves, and persuading each one to act. This is the leadership Robinson, who with the support of the Women's Political Council, exercised in Montgomery, Alabama.

Statement of the Problem and Theoretical Framework

The article explores the basic question women today are still asking: How does a woman lead? The answer is built on a theoretical leadership model defined by Ronald Heifetz in his book, *Leadership without easy answers*, which basically states that the true leader mobilizes "people to tackle tough problems" (Heifetz, 1994, p. 15). Burns affirms Heifetz's definition when he states: "Leaders take the initiative in mobilizing people for participation in the processes of change, encouraging a sense of collective identity and collective efficacy, which in turn brings stronger feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy" (Burns, 2003, p. 25).

Heifetz's critical distinction on a leader is built on society's ideas about how it views making progress on social problems (1994). For one group, Heifetz defines leadership as "influencing the community to follow the leader's vision" (1994, p. 14). In this definition, influence resides with the leader. It is his vision, and his goal to get society to look to him for answers. He is the classic "great-man" leader. When things go wrong, the fault rests with the leader. For the second group, Heifetz defines leadership as "influencing the community to face its problems" (1994, p. 14). In the second definition, progress on problems is the hallmark of leadership, but the leader achieves progress by mobilizing people to face the problems of the day. In the second model, communities make progress on problems because leaders challenge and help them do so. Leaders persuade them to act (Phillips, 1998). When things go wrong, the fault lies with both the leader and the followers.

Robinson was a leader who led by mobilizing others – by caring and inspiring others to act – by tapping an emotional nerve, which allowed them to unite for themselves in what Martin Luther King, Jr. simply called "a miracle" (King, 1958, p. 54). With this theoretical framework, this study will explore how Robinson led a city to change a nation.

Background

For years, the stories of the Montgomery bus boycott revolved around two individuals: Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The intent of this article is not to diminish their roles, but rather to provide the rest of the story. As Douglas Brinkley in his book, *Rosa Parks*, wrote: "More than any other individual, including Gray and even Parks herself, it was Robinson who organized the Montgomery bus boycott" (2000, p. 122).

Although King refers to Robinson in several places in his book, *Stride toward freedom: the Montgomery story*, her place in history may have been overlooked or simply forgotten if not for the work of historian David Garrow, author of *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (1986), and J. Mills Thornton, III, professor of the University of Michigan. In his foreword in Robinson's book (1987), Garrow states that he first came across Robinson's name and that of the Women's Political Council (WPC) in a study written by Thornton called the "Challenge and response in the Montgomery bus boycott of 1955-56" (1980). Based on further research, Garrow reviewed documents accumulated by the Montgomery County District Attorney's office and came across a letter dated May 21, 1954, from Robinson on behalf of the WPC to Montgomery Mayor W. A. Gayle demanding improved conditions for black riders and threatening a citywide boycott. The document identified two significant historical facts: 1) There existed a group of African American women who took the lead in creating the Montgomery bus boycott; and 2) The

letter was dated more than a year and a half before the boycott demonstrating a level of significant pre-boycott activity (Garrow, 1986).

Garrow followed up his finding by searching for and finding Robinson in 1984 in Los Angeles, California (Robinson, 1987). During his visit, Robinson shared with him her autobiographical manuscript, which with Garrow's assistance, was published in 1987, *The Montgomery bus boycott and the women who started it: The memoir of Jo Ann Gibson Robinson*. With the publishing of her book, Robinson's firsthand story became available for research.

Robinson's Leadership Moment

In 1949, Robinson was 33 and living in Montgomery, Alabama where she began teaching English at the Historically Black College and University, Alabama State College (Robinson, 1987). She had already been married and had a baby; but after her child's death, she became bitter. Her marriage ended, and she began graduate school at Atlanta University. With her M.A. in English and literature, Montgomery was a new beginning for Robinson. That December she planned a trip home to see her family in Ohio, and writes, "I was as happy as I had ever been in my life that Saturday morning" (1987, p. 15).

On that particular Saturday morning in December, Robinson rose early and drove her car loaded with her suitcases to the airport, checked her bags, and then returned to the college campus where she locked her car in the garage. Her plan was to take the short bus ride to her friend's who had volunteered to take her to the airport. Robinson then proceeded to the bus stop (Robinson, 1987).

When the bus arrived, Robinson happily boarded observing there were only two other passengers: a white woman in row three and a black gentleman seated near the back. Robinson took her place in row five and immediately closed her eyes envisioning the wonderful time she would have for the next two weeks with family and friends in Ohio.

From a faraway place, Robinson described hearing a harsh sound yelling, but she was too happy to be bothered. As the words were repeated, Robinson opened her eyes realizing the bus had stopped. The bus driver was out of his seat, charging for her and shouting for her to get up from her seat. His hand was drawn back as if he were planning on striking Robinson (Robinson, 1987). Robinson ran to the front of the bus and stepped down when she suddenly remembered she was supposed to use the back door. Fortunately, the door opened. Robinson stumbled out the door, humiliated and in tears, and ran to the college (Robinson, 1987).

As a professional woman, Robinson owned her own car. She was unaccustomed to abiding by Montgomery's bus seating practices that required individuals of "color" to reserve the front ten seats for white riders. Robinson writes about the experience: "I felt like a dog. And I got mad, after this was over, and I realized that I was a human being, and just as intelligent and far more trained than that bus driver was. But I think he wanted to hurt me, and he did...I cried all the way to Cleveland" (1987, p. xiii).

The experience became Robinson's personal defining moment, which led her to focus her energies on ending segregated bus seating (Robinson, 1987). "It was then that I made up...my mind that whatever I could add to that organization that would help to bring that practice [segregated busing] down I would do it" (1987, p. xiii-xiv).

Robinson returned from her Christmas vacation with one thing on her mind – to put an end to busing segregation. She attended the next Women’s Political Council meeting where she shared her experience and inquired if others had similar experiences. Robinson soon learned her experience was not unique (Robinson, 1987). Numerous members shared similar abuse at the hands of the Montgomery bus drivers.

Based on the experiences of the women of the WPC, Robinson used her sphere of influence to begin preparing to stage a bus boycott when the “time was ripe and the people were ready” (1987, p. 17). Robinson understood the need to ensure she was not acting alone, but in collaboration with others.

The Importance of the Bus Ride to African Americans in the South

Although African Americans were emancipated in the mid-1800s, by the early twentieth century, “it was becoming clear that the Negro would be effectively disfranchised throughout the South, that he would be firmly relegated to the lower rungs of the economic ladder, and that neither equality nor aspirations for equality in any department of life were for him” (Woodward, 1966, pp. 6-7). The daily bus ride was one of the few places in the South where blacks and whites were segregated under the same roof and in full view of each other.

A segregated bus ride dramatized the painful humiliation of the Jim Crow system (Birnbaum & Taylor, 2000). The Jim Crow system of public transportation required that every public bus have both a “colored” section in the back and a white section in the front. When the white section filled up, the blacks were required to move farther toward the back. When the “colored” section filled up, blacks had to stand even when seats in the white section were empty and available (Robinson, 1987). This Jim Crow rule of public transportation affected nearly twenty to twenty-five thousand black people in Montgomery who rode the city buses intermittently each day. It was estimated that three out of five of these individuals suffered some humiliating experience on the public transit lines.

The Women’s Political Council

Robinson was a member of the Women’s Political Council (WPC), which was started by a professor at Alabama State College, Dr. Mary Burks, in 1946 when she was not allowed to join Montgomery’s League of Women Voters (Robinson, 1987). The WPC’s original purpose was to inspire Negroes to live above mediocrity by elevating their thinking, encouraging literacy, registering and voting, and improving their group status. As Robinson described the organization, “We were ‘woman power,’ organized to cope with any injustice, no matter what, against the darker sect” (1987, p. 23).

When Robinson was asked to become the president of the WPC in 1950, she eagerly accepted. As the new president, Robinson took the initiative to make things happen. She called Montgomery’s Mayor Gale and requested an audience with him and the two city commissioners. Five members of the WPC joined her, and together they worked for a time with the mayor’s staff in helping to solve problems where blacks were concerned (Robinson, 1987). When the struggle for integration on the buses began, however, the friendship ended.

In 1952 matters got worse when a white bus driver and Negro man got into an argument over a dime fare (Robinson, 1987). When the Montgomery police arrived, they shot and killed the black man. His name was Brooks. By 1953, members of the WPC had received

some thirty complaints against the bus company. During the period from 1954 – 1955, the complaints about the abuse on the buses that were being received by the WPC multiplied. “The black Women’s Political Council had been planning the boycott of Montgomery City Lines for months...The idea itself had been entertained for years” (Robinson, 1987, p. 20). As a college town, the WPC believed Montgomery was capable of integrating.

The Time Is Ripe – 1955

During 1955, while complaints continued to come into the WPC, other complaints were sent to many of the 67 other black civic organizations – demanding action. “The masses of blacks, incapable of defending themselves, wanted competent people of their race to intercede with [the] proper officials for better treatment on transportation lines and other public facilities” (Robinson, 1987, p. 27).

On March 2, 1955, Claudette Colvin, a fifteen-year-old student who was quiet, reserved, and religious, was arrested for failing to give up her seat in the black section when the bus became full. The news of Claudette’s arrest traveled fast and some members of the WPC called for a boycott, “but some members were doubtful; some wanted to wait. The women wanted to be certain that the entire city was behind them, and opinions also differed where Claudette was concerned” (Robinson, 1987, p. 39).

In October 1955, Mary Louis Smith, 18, was arrested and fined for refusing to move to the back of the bus. Because her case was unpublicized, she was found guilty, paid her fine, and was back riding the bus before anyone really knew (Robinson, 1987).

Then came the fateful day of December 1, 1955. A prominent, well-respected, middle-aged black woman named Rosa Parks¹ was arrested for refusing to give her seat to a white man. “I was thinking that the only way to let them know I felt I was being mistreated, was to do just what I did – resist the order” (Garrow, 1986, p. 12), Parks later recalled. The time had come, and she demonstrated the courage to say, “Enough!”

Word of Parks’ arrest spread like wildfire through the black community. E. D. Nixon, NAACP local leader, and liberal white attorney Clifford Durr and his wife went to jail and secured Parks’ release. According to Nixon, he and the Durrs discussed the possibility of Parks² being a test case because of the strength of her character (Thornton, 2002). Parks’ trial was to be on Monday, December 5. “But nothing was done. A numbing helplessness seemed to paralyze everyone” (Robinson, 1987, p. 44). A leadership void existed. The question was: Would anyone step up?

Robinson’s Second Defining Leadership Moment

At 11:30 p.m., December 1, 1955, Robinson’s phone rang. Fred Gray, Montgomery’s own black attorney, good friend, and former student, returned Robinson’s call from earlier in the day (Robinson, 1987). Gray had been out of town and was shocked at the news of Parks’ arrest. Robinson shared she thought it was time the WPC should distribute thousands of notices calling for a bus boycott on Monday, the day of Parks’ trial (1987).

¹ Rosa Parks had been put off a Montgomery city bus back in 1943 for boarding at the front rather than the rear (Parks, 1996, p. 13).

² Rosa Parks, at the time of her arrest, was serving as the secretary and a youth worker in the NAACP’s Montgomery branch (Keller & Reuther, 2006, p. 1090).

Gray asked one simple question: Are you ready? (Robinson, 1987). Without a pause, Robinson assured him she and the WPC were. Robinson hung up the phone. On the back of an envelope, she scribbled a note: "The Women's Political Council will not wait for Mrs. Parks' consent to call for a boycott of city buses. On Friday, December 2, 1955, the women of Montgomery will call for a boycott to take place on Monday, December 5³ (1987, p. 45).

Robinson was alone in her decision to act. There was no one and no time to call. If something was going to get done, the defining moment demanded she would need to do something now. As a true leader, she chose to act. Using her skill set of strengths, first she penned the note with the passion and heart of a victim who knew firsthand the terrors of riding the bus.

Another Negro woman has been arrested and thrown in jail because she refused to get up out of her seat on the bus for a white person to sit down. It is the second time since the Claudette Colvin case that a Negro woman has been arrested for the same thing. This has to be stopped. Negroes have rights, too, for if Negroes did not ride the buses, they could not operate. Three-fourths of the riders are Negroes, yet we are arrested, or have to stand over empty seats. If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother. This woman's case will come up on Monday. We are, therefore, asking every Negro to stay off the buses to work, to town, to school, or anywhere on Monday. You can afford to stay out of school for one day if you have no other way to go except by bus. You can also afford to stay out of town for one day. If you work, take a cab, or walk. But please, children and grown-ups, don't ride the bus at all on Monday. Please stay off of all the buses Monday (1987, p. 45-46).

Robinson then put in place the plan she had strategized months before. She was ready to give the African American citizens of Montgomery the power to choose to make a difference in their own lives.

The Plan

Robinson called John Cannon, a friend and colleague at the college, who had access to the college's mimeograph equipment (Robinson, 1987). He, too, had experienced abuse on the buses and was willing to assist. She next called two trusted senior students. They met at school in the middle of the night and by 4 a.m. the leaflets were duplicated, cut, bundled, and ready to be delivered. A strategy for distribution was then developed. With the bundles loaded in the cars, routes outlined, Robinson went and taught her 8 a.m. class. After class Robinson and her two students dropped off tens of thousands of leaflets...at schools, businesses, beauty parlors, churches, factories, everywhere. "No one knew where the notices had come from or who had arranged for their circulation, and no one cared...but deep within the heart of every black person was a joy he or she dared not reveal" (Robinson, 1987, p. 47).

Unfortunately, a fellow teacher, who was not a part of the WPC or even a resident of Montgomery, secured a copy of the leaflet and carried it straight to the office of the president of Alabama State College, Dr. H. Council Trenholm (Robinson, 1987). When

³ Varying historical accounts have Robinson calling Edgar Nixon, or Ralph Abernathy calling Robinson based on a call from Nixon. Based on the detail of Robinson's account, it seems odd she would omit mentioning a call from Nixon if it did occur. Thornton, however, in his book, *Dividing Lines*, states that Robinson essentially took the matter out of Nixon's hands (Thornton, 2002, p. 61).

Robinson returned to campus, there was a message from the president asking her to come to his office.

The Cost

Robinson went to President Trenholm's office and felt fear for the first time (Robinson, 1987). According to Thornton, Trenholm was furious because she put the school in danger of white retaliation. He even threatened to dismiss her (2002). Robinson told Trenholm of the outrages, the humiliations of riding the buses. She told him about Colvin and Parks, both who had been arrested and jailed. His anger turned to concern.

"Your group must continue to press for civil rights" (Robinson, 1987, p. 50). He instructed Robinson, however, that she needed to remain behind the scenes and not to involve the college. As Robinson explained, "I kept a low profile and stayed as much as possible in the background...not from fear from my own well-being, but rather out of deep respect for Trenholm, for Alabama State college, and for its faculty and student body – all of whom would have been unavoidably implicated in case of trouble" (1987, p. 10). Trenholm⁴ did require Robinson to reimburse the school for the paper she used to run off her 52,500 leaflets (Robinson, 1987). He also remained her unofficial advisor in the matter of the boycott. Whenever Robinson needed advice, she would call Trenholm's wife, Portia, and communicate the need or question no matter what the hour. "Dr. Trenholm...never sent me away without submitting workable solutions to almost insoluble problems" (Robinson, 1987, pp. 51-52).

Leadership and the Black Church

A number of Montgomery's black ministers were gathered together on Friday morning allowing them all to receive their notices of the boycott at the same time (Robinson, 1987). The ministers definitely were needed for moral support and Christian leadership. The boycott was the first time in the history of Montgomery that the black ministers united for civic improvement – to offer their leadership to the masses. Although the ministers seemed enthusiastic about the one-day boycott, many were not sure they wanted their names associated with the event because they were fearful of white retaliation (Stanton, 2006). Nixon supposedly was instrumental in shaming the ministers into action.

A meeting was called for Friday evening. "By the time the 75 or so leaders [ministers] convened, they found themselves faced with a *fait accompli*; the boycott had already been called by Robinson's leaflets" (Thornton, 2002). "Had they [the ministers] not done so [backed the boycott], they might have alienated themselves from their congregations and indeed lost members, for the masses were ready, and they were united!" (Robinson, 1987, p. 54).

Spreading the News

According to Robinson's account, it was a maid who gave a copy of one of the leaflets to her employer who then contacted the *Alabama Journal* and *Montgomery Advertiser* (Robinson, 1987). In other works, Nixon claimed that responsibility.⁵ Whatever the source, throughout

⁴ Dr. Trenholm did not participate publicly in the boycott; he did, however, serve on the board with city and bus officials to help end the boycott (Robinson, 1987).

⁵ Mr. Nixon claimed that on December 2, 1955, he personally gave a copy Mrs. Robinson's leaflet to Joe Azbell, a white reporter for the *Montgomery Advertiser*, with the comment, "I've got a big story for you" (Gaillard, 2004, p.

the weekend the local newspapers, radio stations, and television stations, gave the boycott full coverage. If there had been any concern someone might not have received the message of the boycott, by Sunday night, there was no more concern. Everyone knew.

The plan, devised by Mrs. Robinson and the WPC, stated that beginning at 5:30 a.m., Monday, December 5, Negroes would congregate at the corners (Robinson, 1987). There they would be picked up by Negro Taxis at the reduced rates of 10 cents per person, or by one of the 200 private cars being offered free to bus riders for Monday only (Robinson, 1987, p. 20). The question was: How would Montgomery's African American citizens respond?

African Americans Act on Their Own Behalf

On the morning of December 5, 1955, the first buses went for their regular morning pickups. No passengers waited at the bus stops. "Instead, hundreds of people were walking or boarding taxis or private cars" (Robinson, 1987, p. 58).

King described how he and his wife, Coretta, awoke earlier than usual that morning. Because a bus stop was just several feet from the Kings' home, they could observe the opening scene from their front window. "I was in the kitchen drinking my coffee when I heard Coretta cry, 'Martin, Martin, come quickly!'... As I approached the front window, Coretta pointed joyfully to a slowly moving bus: 'Darling it's empty!'" (King, 1958, p. 53).

By mid-morning, blacks had made history. Never before had they united in such a manner. "It was becoming apparent that we had reached almost 100 per cent. A miracle had taken place" (King, 1958, p. 54). The black people received open respect and admiration from the many white individuals who looked on.

The importance of what happened on December 5, 1955, cannot be overstated. African Americans at the grassroots level took responsibility for what happened to them. King described the once dormant and quiescent African American community as now being fully awake (1958). Robinson stated that the one day of protest created a "new person" in the Negro creating a new spirit and a new feeling, and there was "no turning back" (1987, pp. 75-76).

On the evening of December 5, 1955, over 6,000 black people plus local reporters filled the Holt Street Baptist Church for the first of many mass meetings of the boycott. That evening, Dr. Martin Luther King was elected to be the president⁶ of the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA).⁷ He was only 26 at the time, but his background had prepared him for the leadership. He was the only minister in Montgomery to have a Ph.D.,

11). Thornton points out that, "the memory of each participant has necessarily been shaped to some extent by his or her knowledge of and reaction to subsequent events. In the final analysis, the historian must ground his or her judgment in the sense one derives from the contemporary documents" (Thornton, 2002, p. 606, n101).

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and one could easily discern his wisdom and brilliance. He was well read, and familiar with the great thinkers of various civilizations. There was no doubt that the people wanted King to lead them (Robinson, 1987).⁸

Robinson Stays Involved

Robinson stayed involved with the movement she helped start by serving on the executive board of the Montgomery Improvement Association with other men and women from the community. She was asked by King to produce a regular newsletter, which was called the *MIA Newsletter*. In response to the newsletter, thousands of dollars were being sent to the MIA from across the state and around the world (Robinson, 1987). “The time had come for the black people to stop ‘waiting on the Lord,’ and to help God ‘make rough ways smooth’” (Robinson, 1987, pp. 75-76). The first day’s boycott had to go on. For once the blacks felt they were in the driver’s seat. “They were ‘somebody’” (Robinson, 1987, p. 76).

Building Momentum

The one-day boycott grew into 381 days of personal sacrifice for those who chose to endure physical discomfort rather than submit to the humiliation of the segregated bus ride (King, 1958). Some of the boycotters were older, but still they chose to walk as much as twelve miles a day simply to become their own agents of change.

The boycott began as a local event, but when the home of King was bombed on January 30, 1956, the attention of the nation turned to Montgomery, Alabama (Robinson, 1987). King was immediately accepted and respected nationally and internationally as the leader. In his response to the bombing after ensuring his wife and daughter were not hurt, King responded:

It is regrettable that this has happened, but we must remain peaceful, for we believe in law and order. Don't get panicky; don't get your weapons. We are not advocating violence... This movement will not stop, for what we are doing is right and just! (Robinson, 1987, p. 132).

On January 31, 1956, Fred Gray, Robinson’s attorney friend, filed suit on behalf of his five clients in the U.S. District Court who had all suffered on buses.

In mid-February, a grand jury was asked to investigate the boycott. The grand jury found the boycott to be illegal and indicted 115 boycott leaders who were to be arrested the next day including Robinson. King and Abernathy were picked up first (Robinson, 1987). Eventually all of the individuals turned themselves in, posted bond and were released. King’s trial was set first. As anticipated, he was found guilty and the case was appealed in federal court. When a ruling came down from federal court in favor of King, the City announced it would appeal the decision to the U.S. Supreme Court. The months drug on. Even Montgomery’s white business leaders tried to end the boycott, but to no avail (Garrow, 1986). The city’s white leaders would not budge even though the boycott was costing the bus company an estimated \$3,000 a day (Garrow, 1986).

⁸ Dr. King had noted three major problems in the Negro community of Montgomery which must be remedied before true social progress could be made: (1) lack of unity among leaders; (2) a community crippled by the indifference of the educated group; and (3) apparent apathy of Negro ministers when presented with social problems (King, p. 34-35).

On November 13, 1956, while King and his aides awaited a ruling in local court on the legality of the car pool, they received word: “The United States Supreme Court today affirmed a decision of a special three-judge U.S. District Court in declaring Alabama’s state and local laws requiring segregation on buses, unconstitutional” (*Ebony*, 1971, pp. 5-7). Montgomery’s African American citizens had won!

When the U.S. marshals arrived in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 21, 1956, to serve the Supreme Court order on Montgomery’s city officials, and the Montgomery City Lines resumed full operation, Montgomery’s African Americans boarded the buses including Parks and King who took seats in what had been the “white-only” section (Robinson, 1987). The Civil War had freed the African Americans from physical bondage, but Robinson had helped free their souls to act and dream on their own behalf.

How Did Robinson Lead?

Robinson led as an individual who happened to be a woman and empowered the black person to become his or her own person. As she wrote, “The people did it!” (1987, p. 3). Robinson demonstrated what Heifetz in his book, *Leadership without easy answers*, refers to as leadership without authority – “the domain to which women have been restricted for ages” (1994, p. 184). Heifetz observed that it is often when there is a scarcity of leadership from those in authority, that individuals without authority exercise leadership. Montgomery’s African Americans lacked cohesive, action-oriented leadership. Into this vacuum of leadership, Robinson through her planning and little pamphlet calling for action provided Montgomery’s blacks with a way to act on their own behalf. Through the lens of Heifetz’s “mobilize people to tackle tough problems” leadership model, Robinson led without authority and helped change a people and a nation.

Mobilizing Others to Tackle Their Tough Problems

Robinson led, not alone, but from the circle of influence she had through the WPC. Heifetz states that individuals without authority often must build and broaden their informal authority to gain leverage (1994). She was a collaborator who knew how to build teams. She treated people with respect and dignity when throughout the early fifties, she met with the white city managers trying to find a point of agreement. Her leadership was personal. She led from what Heifetz would call the frontline (1994). She, as well as three out of every five black citizens in Montgomery, had experienced the abuse and humiliation at the hands of Montgomery’s all white bus drivers (Robinson, 1987).

Based on the facts of the boycott, Robinson was a skilled strategist and organizer. Even without authority, Robinson’s boycott plan came together and got people to work. Robinson was a gifted writer who wrote from her heart who within the space of just over 200 words in her pamphlet motivated Montgomery’s blacks to act for the first time in their history on their own behalf. Her impassioned plea for action struck everyone: “If we do not do something to stop these arrests, they will continue. The next time it may be you, or your daughter, or mother” (1987, pp. 45-46).

After Robinson’s humiliating experience on the bus, she was determined to end bus segregation for the people of Montgomery. The bus boycott was not about where one sat on the bus; it was about justice and human dignity. Robinson was working to protect other men and women like herself. She painted a dream, which gave others the motivation to act...to tackle, as Heifetz explained, their own tough problems (1994).

Conclusions

The Montgomery bus boycott was never about one actor or leader (King, 1958). It was, according to King, “the chronicle of 50,000 Negroes who took to hear the principles of nonviolence, who learned to fight for their rights with the weapon of love, and who, in the process, acquired a new estimate of their own human worth” (1958, p. 9). Turbulent times create the “leadership moments” described by Useem (1998) when individuals are given a choice: 1) Sit on the sidelines in silence; or 2) Take up the cause and lead. For Robinson, her choice was to act. Her leadership birthed a new attitude among African Americans in Montgomery. As she wrote: “They seem to recognize . . . that freedom is bought with a price, that nothing of value comes easily . . . they are a new people” (1987, p. 178). In the midst of today’s turbulent times, the question remains: Who will choose to take up today’s opportunities and lead the world’s citizens to tackle their own tough problems for better change?

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