



**REMEMBERING ROSA PARKS:  
FOR HER, OUR PEOPLE AND OUR STRUGGLE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

The marking of the passing of Ms. Rosa Parks, 12 years ago last month, immediately brings to mind the long, hard and heroic struggle waged by African people to expand the realm of freedom and justice in this country as well as the people, great and small, who made it possible. Mrs. Rosa Parks was one of the great ones, whose life we hold up as a lesson and legacy for both ourselves and the world. She was an ordinary person, invited by history to do an extraordinary thing in the ongoing African ethical obligation to bring good in the world. And she accepted this awesome invitation of history with strength, dignity and determination, defying centuries of racial protocol and oppression.

Mrs. Rosa Parks accepted the invitation of history on December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama. She tells us of that decisive act of defiance of racial dominance and degradation, saying, "I knew there was a possibility of being mistreated (i.e., beaten or worst), but an opportunity was being given to me to do what I had asked of others," i.e., to defy oppression.

It is important here to stress that the invitation of history to Mrs. Parks was handed at the same time to her people and they accepted the invitation also. Thus, the ground of her greatness and the spark of the Movement, lay not simply in her refusing to surrender her seat, for she and many others had done that before. What was important was not only that she remained seated on the bus, but that she also stood up in society and in a Movement with her people, and with them resisted a brutal racism that wreaked havoc not only on her life as a person, but also on our lives as a people.

Moreover, it is important to note that she had a long history of struggle for human and civil rights and social justice. She often gave honor to her mother and grandparents who taught her to defend her rights and dignity; her husband, Mr. Raymond Parks, who helped cultivate her activism through working together in the NAACP, and all the women and men in the Movement who embraced and supported her.

And yet the established order has packaged and presented her as the lone and lonely heroine, sitting in "quiet dignity" with no history of struggle behind her; no future of struggle in front of her; no people in struggle around and with her; and no Movement which gave ground, support and meaning to her actions and initiatives. By doing this, they seek to mask the strength of the masses and hide their capacity to produce and nurture the great persons they need.

In contrast to this, Mrs. Parks tells us, she had "a life history of being rebellious against being mistreated because of my color" and that she and others in Montgomery had been struggling and "planning for freedom all our lives." Thus, her honor is a shared honor that she herself shared with her people and the many persons who helped her become a giant in a generation of great leaders, i.e., Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, et al.

The meaning of Mrs. Parks to us lies, like all our history and historical figures in: the lessons she has left us; the spirit of possibility she provides us; the model of human excellence and achievement she offers us; and the morality of remembrance

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she gives us an opportunity to practice. The first lesson for her life is that of the indispensability and unavailability of struggle. Second, we learn from Mrs. Parks that even as we are chosen by history, we must also choose. At a critical juncture, Mrs. Parks said she “had been pushed as far as I could be pushed. . .I had decided I would have to know once and for all what rights I had as a human being and a citizen.” And that knowledge and reaffirmation could only come in resistance to the White supremacy that would deny those rights.

A third lesson of Mrs. Parks’ life is, the spirit of possibility she offers for us and also reminds us to look within for the strength needed to accomplish both small and great things. Mrs. Parks clearly served as a spark which inspired a Movement and thus, she

serves as a reminder that *one spark in the right season and situation can set a whole forest on fire.*

A fourth lesson from Mrs. Parks’ life is as she said, “each person must live their life as a model for others.” And they must work, build and struggle, as our ancestors in the *Husia* taught us, conscious of the fact that “every day is a donation to eternity and even one hour is a contribution to the future.”

Finally, Mrs. Parks teaches us to appreciate, learn and carry on the legacy of those who walked, worked and struggled before us. It was her belief and hope that “memories of our lives, of our work and our deeds will continue in others.” And at the center of those memories must be, as the *Odu Ifa* says, the ongoing moral obligation to constantly struggle to bring good in the world and not let any good be lost.

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