

Rain & Thunder
Winter 2005

The Last Shall Be First

by Suzanne Sunshower

I'll never forget one spectacular summer day in Detroit's infamous Cass Corridor about 15 or 20 years ago. Everyone I passed on the street that day was so friendly and polite that I almost forgot I was walking through a notoriously impoverished section of town. The Cass Corridor is, thankfully, a highly politicized community of artists, students, activists and others, but a casual walk through the neighborhood can be depressing. Reminders were (and are) everywhere that trickle-down economics always plugs-up at the top, somewhere far from inner city Detroit. Yet, on this particular day, the sun was shining and everyone I passed seemed - well, happy. Smiling.

It was the kind of day that made me feel like I could let go of politics. After all, being political doesn't mean you have to be angry and unhappy all the time, or constantly reminding everyone how oppressed they are. Times in Detroit can be so trying that on a happy day in the Corridor you just have to remind yourself to go pleasantly with the flow, and embrace the strength found in the simple joy of others.

I stopped to pick up a few things at the corner store before doing the bulk of my shopping at the Cass Corridor Food Co-op. I chatted briefly with a gentleman ahead of me in line then, before I knew it, it was my turn at the register. I held out a few dollars to pay for my groceries but was simply asked if I needed a sack for my items.

"That man paid for you," the cashier said, delighting in my surprise. "You're good. Have a nice day," she assured me, smiling.

I blinked, still surprised but happy at my luck. Unfortunately my benefactor was no longer in sight for me to thank, so I left, thrilled to have unexpected extra cash to spend on organic goods at the Co-op.

A couple blocks away, I merrily cruised through the aisles of the Co-op, allowing myself a few extra veggies and small snack items thanks to my cash windfall. Joining the long line at the register there, out of the corner of my eye I noticed an elder-woman struggling in a nearby aisle with her loaded cart. I jumped out of line to lend a hand. She was a tiny woman, so I pulled her cart for her into my space in the line. I turned and smiled at the woman who had been waiting behind me, alerting her that I was letting this elder take my place. She smiled back at me, as if to say she understood and didn't mind. It was such a beautiful day, I guessed she didn't want to tussle over a small thing.

I barely had time to turn back around before the woman was directing me to arrange the items in her cart and hand them up to her, just so, so she could place them on the counter in a particular order. She had quite a load, so I had to put down my hand basket in order to assist her. I realized it would take some time, and bending over her cart to hand her what she wanted - just so - was a pain in the rear, but I chose to be patient and not mind. How could I be cranky about helping this stranger on such a wonderful day, and when I had been so blessed by a stranger's actions just a short time before at the other store?

I remember thinking that this woman who was bossing me around was quite spirited. Who knew what kinds of tribulations this elder Black woman had known in her lifetime? I figured that she had surely earned the right to her fortitude, and that I had better just do what she said. Not just for karma's sake, but because it was probably the right thing to do.

Finally, only after all of her one hundred items were placed on the check stand, did I get a chance to straighten up and get a good look at the person I had been helping. Our eyes met, and she smiled at me warmly, sincerely. "Thank you," she said.

At first all I could do was laugh, because I recognized this person. She was so famous, it was funny. Then I caught my breath and bowed to her, saying, "No. Thank you."

I turned around to the rest of the line, and everyone else was laughing, too. I had been too busy following my elder's instructions to a tee, and preoccupied with my thoughts, to notice what everyone else already knew. The woman I had jumped out of line to assist was none other than Ms. Rosa Parks, the most widely recognized face of the Black Civil Rights Movement! "Mother" Parks, as we called her in Detroit, was watching me and laughing a little, too. She understood my laughter and amazement. I imagined if ever there was someone who deserved a cut in line, it was she. It was an embarrassingly small act of kindness to show someone whose actions long ago had meant so much to the lives of others. I was so glad that I had followed the spirit winds of the day (and my better instincts), and had done 'the right thing', jumping in to help this 'unknown' elder.

Although I had met Ms. Parks before, and was to see her often enough again around Detroit, that one meeting remains my favorite tale of running into this legendary warrior-woman elder. I sometimes tell this

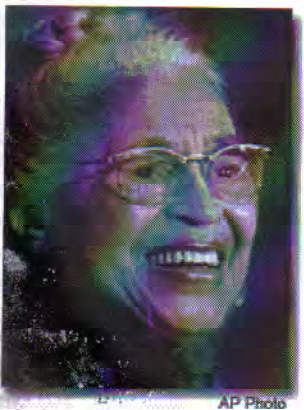
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simple story in order to point up why we should respect and help our elders. We always know who they are or what part their lives may have played in the bigger picture of Life. Even elders who lived (and survived) the humblest of lives walked the paths upon which they were set in order to open the way for others.

I also tell the story because it reminds us all to check which way the spirit winds (and our instincts) are blowing and to go with the flow - it's not corny, it makes sense. We activists get so wrapped up in analyzing our behavior, and worrying if we drop our political guard, that we don't realize that we will do 'the right thing' instinctively, if we are paying attention to the vibes around us.

And anyway, isn't it nice for us die-hard activist warriors to know that even a beautiful, happy, smiling, sunny day can be political.

In Honor and Memory of Rosa Parks
February 4, 1913 - October 24, 2005



Civil rights leader Rosa Parks passed away in her Detroit home on Monday evening at age 92. Parks is best remembered for refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus to a white man. She was arrested and fined, and her actions touched off

a massive protest and inspired a generation of civil rights activists. While legend has held that Parks was "too tired" to give up her seat, she was in reality an active member of the NAACP, fully aware of the consequences of her actions.

Parks received the Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Congressional Gold Medal for her civil rights work, and in 1988 spoke to the ongoing importance of civil rights work, saying, "I am leaving this legacy to all of you to bring peace, justice, equality, love and a fulfillment of what our lives should be... Without vision, the people will perish, and without courage and inspiration, dreams will die - the dream of freedom and peace."

