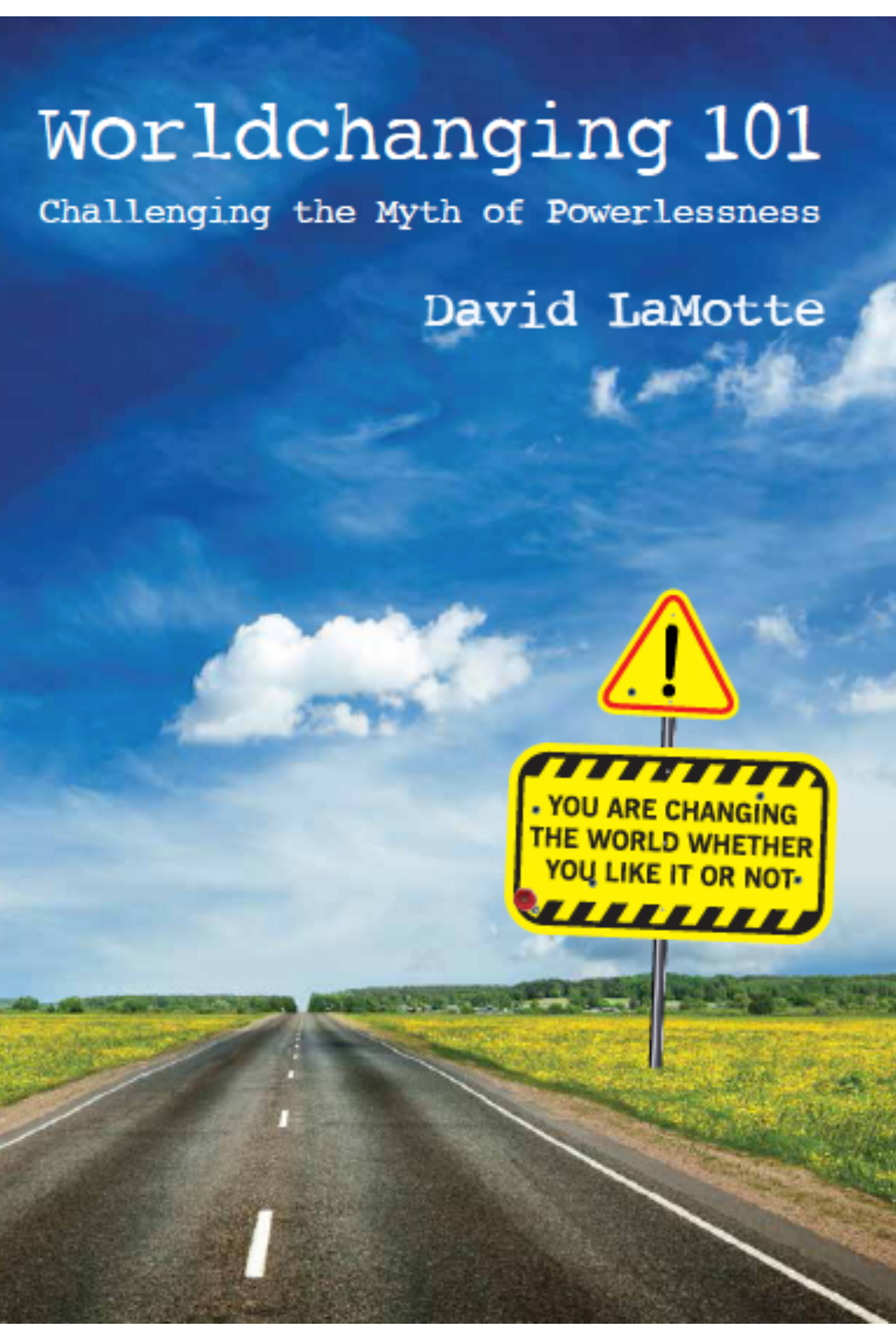
Worldchanging 101

Challenging the Myth of Powerlessness

David LaMotte



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This is an excerpt from the book (chapters 4, 5, and 6), in honor of the sixtieth anniversary of Rosa Parks' arrest. Feel free to distribute it as widely as you like, and by any means you like.

If you would like to read the whole book, you can get a physical copy (signed if you request it) or a digital copy in three different e-book formats, at

www.worldchanging101.com

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Out of the Blue˝

"The work of the world is common as mud."
— Marge Piercy

Somewhere around 1997, I wandered down to my local music hall, the Grey Eagle.[1] Two guys I knew, Matthew Kahler and Shawn Mullins, had driven up from Atlanta for a concert. They are both great writers and performers, so I didn't want to miss the show.

Neither did the other eleven people who showed up. The Grey Eagle could hold over two hundred people, so twelve was a bit awkward. The sound system and stage lighting seemed sort of silly with such a minimal crowd.

Shawn and Matthew were already seasoned performers in those days, though, with enough years on the road and enough perspective to sincerely appreciate those folks who did come out rather than complain about those who didn't. They did a wise and appropriate thing, and I learned by watching them. They brought their guitars and Matthew's drum down off the stage. They invited us to make a circle of chairs and sat down in the circle with us. Then they played their show, chatting and laughing casually with people between songs and answering questions as they went. I think they may have passed me a guitar and asked me to play a song or two as well. In short, they celebrated and nourished the beautiful intimacy of a small gathering, rather than awkwardly pretending it was a large one.

The next time Shawn came to town, as I recall, he came alone in his pickup truck. Or rather, he came with his little dog, 'Roadie' in the passengers' seat, which was how he usually rolled in those days. The crowd may have been a little bit better, but, as is often the case, it was grossly out of proportion to his

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[1] In those days, the Grey Eagle was still in Black Mountain, North Carolina, where it was born, though it later moved into the nearby, larger city of Asheville. It's a wonderful music room, where I cut my proverbial teeth as a performer. www.thegreyeagle.com

talent. Shawn is quite a songwriter and deserved a packed house, as the world would soon discover.

I was packing the Grey Eagle in those days, not in proportion to talent, but because it's my own small town and folks support me here. Shawn consistently sold out Eddie's Attic in Decatur, his hometown venue, and my crowds when I went there were hardly packed. So Shawn suggested (or maybe I did?) that we trade opening slots for each other at our home town concert venues so that each of us could be exposed to the other's audience.

We both liked the idea, and we kept in touch on the phone. A few months later he came back to town and opened for me in front of a solid crowd. He was great, as he consistently is; people loved his set and bought lots of CDs.

In fact, a lot of people were starting to discover Shawn's music, including a major radio station in Atlanta where, a few months after opening for me, Shawn was charting with his song "Lullaby." Subsequently, some major record labels took interest in the song. The verses are spoken in Shawn's gravelly, accessible poetry, and the choruses soar with his pure falsetto in a juxtaposition that is hard to resist, not just because it's catchy, but because the whole spectrum of sound and emotion in the song is undeniably authentic.

Not too long after being picked up in Atlanta, the song was at #1 on Billboard's Adult Top 40 charts. It spent eight weeks there and also charted well in the U.K., Canada, and Australia. I thoroughly enjoyed watching that success emerge. Shawn had worked hard at his craft for years, and it was a joy to see that paying off.

I never did get in touch to say so, though, knowing that for a while, at least, Shawn would have a whole lot of people trying to get a bit closer. I didn't want to be one of the many people who suddenly wanted to claim him as a best friend. Besides, I didn't want him to feel obligated to thank me, since naturally, I chalked most of his success up to opening for me in Black Mountain. That had to be the tipping point, right?

Sure enough, life quickly became very busy for Shawn, and, by his own description when we talked about it recently,

somewhat surreal. He was flying to New York to appear on television talk shows and playing concert venues like Madison Square Garden instead of opening for me in Black Mountain.

One night Shawn found himself sitting in the interview chair with Jay Leno on the Tonight Show. Jay opened the interview by saying something along the lines of, "Wow, you came out of nowhere!"

Shawn smiled good-naturedly and said, "Yeah, I guess after ten years on the road, I'm an overnight success." As Shawn recounted it to me, Mr. Leno was surprised and intrigued by his response, and Shawn had the opportunity to gently challenge the 'overnight success' narrative that we love so much as a nation.

As a culture, we prefer the idea that talented artists are 'discovered' and plucked out of obscurity to become stars, somehow skipping over the steady, long-term work of building something valuable.

By the time "Lullaby" hit the pop charts, Shawn had been on the road for years. He had studied music formally, led a military band while he was in the service, performed hundreds of concerts, and put out eight independent CDs. That's not overnight.

Shawn's story, however, doesn't fit the narrative we love. As a culture, we prefer the idea that talented artists are 'discovered' and plucked out of obscurity to become stars, somehow skipping over the steady, long-term work of building something valuable. It rarely happens that way, but this idea holds so much more appeal than the truth because it means we might wake up tomorrow and find that we are being celebrated by the nation.

We love to apply the same narrative to our social justice heroes, but it's not true of them either.

Civil Rights hero and U.S. Congressman John Lewis did not start out being beaten into a coma on the Edmund Pettus

1957 FOR comic book

bridge. He started out going to a meeting. A representative of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) was in town to put on a workshop at a church near Lewis' college, and he went to check it out. FOR had recently published a comic book about Dr. King and the emerging Civil Rights Movement called *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*[2], and Lewis was among many students across the South who had read it. He showed up at the meeting with seven or eight other students and listened to a man named James Lawson lead a discussion about non-violent resistance. Lewis and his fellow students were hooked.

They began meeting every Tuesday night to study justice issues and non-violence, from the fall of 1958 into the fall of 1959. As time went on, they practiced role plays of non-violent resistance, abusing each other physically and verbally in order to feel the full weight of what they were up against and prepare themselves to respond nonviolently. Finally, after a full year of study and preparation, they formed the Nashville Student Movement, which orchestrated the sit-ins that desegregated Nashville's lunch counters, then movie theaters, then restaurants.

Most people in the United States only became aware of that movement when the sit-ins and the the subsequent violent responses to them suddenly dominated the nightly news. It

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[2] This classic publication has been republished by FOR, and has been translated into many languages and has been influential in modern nonviolent movements as well. http://forusa.org/mlkcomic

started, though, with attending a meeting. Or maybe one could argue that it started much earlier than that, when John Lewis heard Rev. King preaching on the radio, or read that comic book. At any rate, it started small.

And for so many people, it stays small and undramatic. And yet these people are the ones who drive the movement and bring about the change. Going to a meeting is not necessarily a 'gateway' action. It may lead to... well, going to more meetings, writing some letters, and talking with some people; and those undramatic actions may matter a great deal in bringing about the changes you seek.

The dozen of us who were at Shawn and Matthew's show at the Grey Eagle won't forget it. That mattered. It moved us and changed us, and it taught me how to approach and honor a smaller-than-hoped-for audience. It wasn't Madison Square, but it wasn't insignificant either.

You may be called to make great sacrifices for things you believe in or you may not, but don't fall into the illusion that what you are doing today has to be grand and heroic in order to matter. Don't discount the value of beginning. It doesn't often come out of the blue. It doesn't have to happen overnight. In fact, I don't know of a time when it ever has.

Heroes and Movements˝

"Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed that easily."

— Dorothy Day

Growing up in the seventies, I had brown corduroy pants, a black and white TV in the living room, feathered hair, and a Trapper Keeper notebook. The widespread cultural turmoil of the Civil Rights Era had subsided, and, other than the occasional school bully and a vague concern that nuclear annihilation might come any day, the cultural space I inhabited felt fairly calm and predictable.

I was born three weeks to the day after Martin Luther King, Jr. was killed. By the time I entered middle school, it had been a generation since Rosa Parks had been arrested. Her story had seasoned enough to feel safe for textbooks. Mrs. Parks was held up as a hero: a seemingly powerless little old African American lady who had made a spontaneous decision not to give up her seat to a White man on a Montgomery bus in 1955 and literally changed the world with her courage.

I was inspired by her story, as I still am, but the shape of that inspiration has changed fundamentally. What I didn't know as a young student is that the version I was being taught had left out or glossed over much of the truth—what I believe to be some of the most important parts.

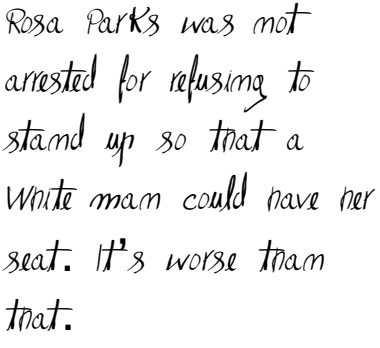
To begin with, Rosa Parks was hardly a 'little old lady'. On Dec. 1, 1955, the day of her arrest, she was 42 years old. As I write these words, that happens to be the same lens through which I am looking at the world, and I sincerely hope that as you read this, you're offering a hearty 'Amen!' that 42 is not terribly old.

Of course, it may well be that I would have seen 42 as fairly ancient through the big eyes of a young boy. I'm not sure it has tremendous significance anyway, except that it seems to

reinforce the perception of her spontaneous rise from helplessness to heroism.

There are other details that are interesting as well, like the fact that Mrs. Parks had quite a bit of Native American heritage, and White ancestry as well. Like my own grandmother, also named Rosa, she had long wavy hair that she only let down at home, pinning it up in elaborate braids and buns whenever she left the house. Without doing anything at all, her very identity challenged the false idea that 'races' can be neatly categorized and separated.

Many other facts are frequently left out of the story, as well, removing painful details of this degrading, systematic oppression. I won't spend a lot of time on them here, but one is worth mentioning: Rosa Parks was not arrested for refusing to stand up so that a White man could have her seat. It's worse than that. Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to stand up so that a White man could have three empty seats beside him, sparing him the supposed indignity of sitting *across the aisle* from a Black woman.



There was not a White section and a Black section on a bus in Montgomery in 1955, there was only a White section, which expanded as more Whites got on. A small sign indicating "Whites only" was moved back, row by row, and the people sitting in that row would need to rise and go stand at the back. The entire row would rise and stand so that, in frequent cases, one White person could sit on that row by himself or herself.

I hope your anger rises a bit at that realization, if it is not one you have encountered before. The truth of that story, it turns out, is even more degrading than many of us were taught. There is, however, a much more important difference between the story I was told and the truth.

No one told me in grade school that Rosa Parks had already been an activist for twelve years by the time she was arrested. She was the secretary for the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), and she was involved in the Women's Political Council in Montgomery. She was a day in, day out activist for years before the day that wrote her name in the history books, and for years afterwards.

Rosa Parks had also traveled to a training camp at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee the summer before she was arrested. She spent ten days there taking classes and spending time with legendary activists like Septima Clark and Myles Horton, a co-founder of Highlander. Highlander was a hub of civil rights training, voting rights activism, and other social action training in that era, and it was an extremely important part of the growing Civil Rights Movement. It was at an informal Pete Seeger concert at Highlander that Dr. King first heard the song "We Shall Overcome." This is where Rosa Parks trained a few months before she was arrested.

Mrs. Parks had been extremely active in the struggle for civil rights for years before she was arrested. Her decision was not a spur-of-the-moment revelation or flash of courage, but rather the result of long-considered convictions and years of work, training, and practice. That changes the narrative of her famous stand, or rather, sit, on the bus in Montgomery in significant ways.

For most of us, Rosa Parks' life is one day long—December 1, 1955. As it turns out, though, her arrest was hardly the first decision point in her journey. Nor was it the last contribution she would make.

Though it may not seem so at first glance, this change in the story is extremely important. The two different versions of these events demonstrate the fundamentally different narratives behind these two conflicting views about how large-scale social change happens. What's more, these two perspectives give us very different sets of instructions for what to do if we would like to see a change.

I was first introduced to the discrepancies between the popular, sanitized version of Rosa Parks' first arrest and the more nuanced and complete story by author and activist Paul Loeb in his book *Soul of a Citizen*, and I have continued to learn more about it over the years since I encountered it there. Loeb points to this story as an excellent example of the lengths we will go to in order to support what can be called the *Hero Narrative* of change.

In this narrative, large scale change happens when an extraordinary individual takes dramatic action in a moment of crisis. Then the problem is fixed, the threat is removed, and the credits roll. We love that storyline, as evidenced by the fact that it provides the plot for most of our entertainment, and arguably our history books as well.

The Hero Narrative, as appealing as it may sound, is ultimately false.

There is one problem with the Hero Narrative, however—it is simply not how large-scale change happens. The Hero Narrative, as appealing as it may sound, is ultimately false. I'm not saying that people don't do heroic things, or that they don't matter. They do, and they do, and that is to be celebrated. But they are seldom the ones who address the problems on a large scale. Before I explain what I mean by that, it might be helpful to look at a hero story.

There are many examples of heroic action to choose from, but one of my favorites is Wesley Autrey. In 2007, Autrey was in New York City, where he lives, waiting for a subway train with his two daughters, when a young man near him had an epileptic seizure and fell onto the tracks below. Autrey and another bystander jumped down onto the rails to try to pull him to safety. As they got there, they heard a train coming. The other person who had jumped down made the reasonable decision to clamber back up onto the platform. Autrey, however, eyed the space between the train and the floor, then moved the shaking young man into the space between the rails and and covered him with his own body while several train cars

raced over them. The space between the ground and the train was about twelve inches, and when the two were pulled up again, Autrey had grease on his hat from the bottom of the train.

There's no question that what Autrey did was profoundly heroic, self-sacrificing, and admirable. And his actions unquestionably had a big effect on Cameron Hollopeter, the young film student whom Autrey saved. It also warmed the hearts of a lot of other people, nationally and internationally. Autrey was all over the news and talk shows, and he received many gifts of gratitude from both anonymous and self-promoting donors.[3] In 2007 he was listed among *Time* magazine's "100 most influential people in the world".

the common denominator among people who really are happy is a sense that their lives are meaningful.

That's the storyline we prefer. If for no other reason, Autrey can be considered extraordinary for this act alone. Few of us can imagine that we would actually have taken such a risk for a stranger. The dramatic act was in response to an unforeseen crisis, and the threat was removed and problem fixed. That's the heroic mythology of change in spades.

It is not, however, a very good model for *large-scale* change. Before we consider why not, though, we need to look at the other narrative for how change happens.

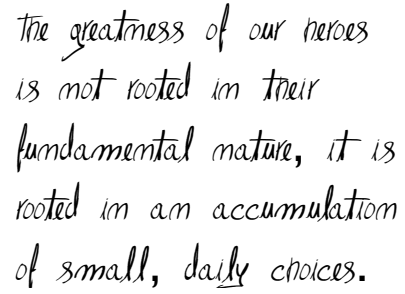
The competing narrative, what I like to call the *Movement Narrative*, says that large-scale social change is brought about by movements—many people taking small actions that contribute to a large shift. This is the kind of example that Rosa Parks provides in the larger context of her whole story. She was a daily activist, doing the work of a

[3] Autrey was wearing a Playboy hat that day, and Playboy sent him a lifetime subscription, as well as a new Jeep. Ellen Degeneres gave him a Jeep as well.

secretary, with, I suspect, all the heroic drama and excitement that title invokes.

This daily activism continued to inform her choices, as did her experience working on a military base, where she first experienced a largely integrated society. Together, these and other influences inspired her to delve deeper into social justice work, seek further training, and eventually take the dramatic stand that she took on that bus.

That's all to say that Rosa Parks did not start with the action we all remember today. She started by getting involved in a small, undramatic way, and she continued to work in those ways for years before and after her moment of fame. She understood that her most important action was not her most famous moment, but the accumulated daily work she did throughout her life.



The problem is that for most of us, heroic stories like Wesley Autrey's and the selectively edited version of Rosa Parks'—not to mention Dr. King's or Gandhi's—are more immobilizing than encouraging. These kinds of heroes seem fundamentally different from us, dramatic and larger-than-life, so the idea of their action being a model for our own doesn't even occur to us. If we ever do consider emulating them, we usually focus on the wrong part; we wonder if we would have the courage to be arrested on that bus, rather than wondering if we can clear the time to go to a meeting about an issue in our community.

In fact, comparing ourselves to our heroes feels vaguely arrogant. Why? I think it's because of our internalization of the Hero Narrative. We have bought into the idea that they are a fundamentally different kind of people than we are. We interpret this not just as a question of doing what they did, but of being *the kind of person* they were, or are. To compare

ourselves, therefore, is to inflate our own significance. We are normal and flawed. They are *übermenschen*. They are saints.

That's wrong-headed. They are neither. The greatness of our heroes is not rooted in their fundamental nature, it is rooted in an accumulation of small, daily choices.

Paul Loeb articulates this well in his bestseller *Soul of a Citizen,* where I first encountered the idea:

> *Chief among the obstacles to acting on these impulses [to get involved] is the mistaken belief 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 a normal person could ever possess. This belief pervades our society, in part because the media tends not to represent heroism as the work of ordinary human beings, which it almost always is.*

In this passage Loeb echoes the famed Catholic Worker activist Dorothy Day, who said of herself and her fellow workers, "Don't call me a saint, I don't want to be dismissed that easily." I think this is what she was getting at. If we separate heroes from the rest of us, then their stories don't call us to action; they only call us to marvel and applaud.

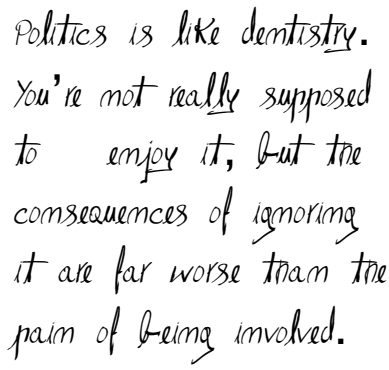
I suspect that most of the people we have separated and sainted would consider that the worst possible outcome of their notoriety. They would much rather that we begin by taking on something small and getting involved, as each of them did, than that we be awed into immobility.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Wesley Autrey said "I don't feel like I did something spectacular; I just saw someone who needed help. I did what I felt was right." In George W. Bush's inauguration speech, he praised Autrey, saying "He insists he's not a hero."

But doesn't the denial of *being* a hero point back to how ingrained the hero myth is? We know that heroes are 'special' people, set apart, and we know that we are 'normal'

people with normal capacities. "I'm not a hero," our hero says in the very moment that there is clear evidence to the contrary, "I'm just a normal person. I just did what I had to do."

It might make more sense to define heroes as 'people who do heroic things', but that's not the definition we actually use.This idea that heroes are defined by their fundamental nature—their difference from the rest of us, their extraordinariness, rather than their choices and actions—is the first point in the definition of the Hero Narrative. Implied in the denial of being a hero is this syllogism: "Heroes are special. I'm not special; I'm normal. Therefore, I'm not a hero."



That piece of dubious logic is followed by the next: "Heroes make a difference. I'm not a hero. Therefore, I can't make a difference."

But the problems with the Hero Narrative don't stop there. Even if you can imagine yourself as a hero, and we assume that heroism is what has a significant effect, how do you display your heroism in order to effect change? Where will you find your oncoming train and student in distress?

This is the Hero Narrative, in a nutshell:

Things change when someone **extraordinary** encounters a moment of **crisis** and does **something dramatic**.

It has three significant elements. The first is that there is something inherently special about the hero. They are extra-ordinary, not ordinary. The second is that there is a moment of crisis. The third is that they respond with dramatic action. It is not the product of ongoing small

efforts; it is a moment of quick and extreme decisions in response to an urgent situation that arises without our agency.

Most of us, without ever examining it, subconsciously subscribe to the Hero Narrative. The story is deep in our cultural context. It is the plot to many if not most of our movies. And not just Bruce Willis movies, not just *X-Men* and *Thor*, but *Harry Potter, Frozen,* and *Cars II*. This is a central story for us, from childhood on.

The fact that this narrative is ubiquitous and deeply woven into our cultural consciousness combines with the fact that it is false to create a dangerous and dysfunctional pattern. The Hero Narrative is a rotten model for addressing the problems we see. If we draw guidance for our actions from the stories we believe about how the world works (and I believe we do), then this is one story we may need to reconsider.

If we subscribe to the hero myth and we want to have a positive impact, then our instructions can be summed up like this:

Step One:
Wait.

Wait for the hero. You're not a hero, are you? I'm not. We all wake up in the morning and smell our own breath. We know we're not superhuman. We are normal. In fact, most of us constitute our own definitions of the word 'normal'. We are our own baseline.

And even if you can find a hero, or you are part of the small percentage of humanity who could perceive *yourself* as a hero, then what are your next instructions?

Step Two:
Wait.

Wait for the crisis. Then summon all your courage and take dramatic action. Wait and watch for the right

moment, when the train is coming or the bus driver asks you to give up your seat, or someone external to you presents a situation that calls forth your courage.

This is a fundamental problem with the Hero Narrative: it is *reactive* rather than *proactive*. That's not extremely effective.

Step Three:

There is no step three because we end up waiting forever for the hero and the crisis to emerge. A very rare few of us may, like Wesley Autrey, find ourselves in a moment of crisis and summon the bravery to do something heroic, and that's wonderful. But is it a useful model for change?

One significant problem with that model is that it denies agency; it emphasizes what happens to you and deemphasizes your ability to examine your situation and make intentional choices about how best to engage in the absence of a crisis.

Subscribing to the Hero Narrative of change can easily make us feel like a little boy at Halloween in his Superman costume, waiting on the porch for someone to cry out in distress so that he can save them. And waiting. And waiting. Finally, he gives up and goes to play some other game, which may be a fair metaphor for what many of us do.

If, however, we subscribe to the movement model, then the instructions are quite different. I'm going to talk more about more bite-sized pieces of that instruction manual later in the book, but it mostly comes down to this: get to work. Find your community and lay out an achievable plan together. Do something small to start with. Bite off a chewable piece and start chewing.

The Hero Narrative is so deeply ingrained in our cultural psyche that we don't even realize it's there, and we've built quite a few castles on its bad foundation. I doubt that the various people who gradually edited Rosa Parks' story down so that it fit the hero myth, in spite of a great

deal of evidence to the contrary, were doing so consciously. I suspect they were just trying to tell the story well and dramatically, and so they made it conform to our underlying narrative, a story we love—that heroes are extraordinary people who respond to a crisis with dramatic and unpremeditated action.

That myth also informed an article I read online a few years ago. The title of the article was rather cynical, and I should have resisted the temptation to click on it, but my curiosity got the better of me. It was called "The 8 Most Overrated People in History."

I was surprised and interested to find the nonviolent Indian independence hero M.K. Gandhi on the list. Having studied Gandhi fairly extensively and worked in India with people who knew and worked with him, I found his inclusion intriguing and surprising.

The author's argument, in short, is that, "[Gandhi] was a figurehead for the cause, while various other leaders were doing most of the work," and that, "the Indian independence movement was a strong force well before Gandhi entered the scene."

Through one lens, the author of this article is not so far from the truth. Yes, a lot of others did the vast majority of the work in the Indian independence movement, and they had certainly done a lot of work before Gandhi became involved.

The important part of this accusation, though, is that Gandhi was just a figurehead, while others were doing most of the work. For the sake of argument, let's say that is an accurate portrayal.

Even if we accept that, what is the other alternative? Is the author seriously suggesting that in order to be a real hero Gandhi should have expelled the British Empire from India single-handedly?

Isn't that the implication?

That's what the Hero Narrative would require. A *real* hero would have taken care of the problem himself, this

argument implies. It's certainly what a Bruce Willis character would have done.

But in the real world, real leaders *lead others* to join them in their work, including those who will become the next generation of leaders. That, I believe, is the true function of heroes: to inspire others. And when a lot of people move a little bit, the problems begin to be addressed.

This means two things. First, it means that the contributions of followers matter a great deal. But second, it also means that we may be fundamentally misunderstanding the job of a leader.

Despite what the Hero Narrative teaches us, our leaders and heroes are seldom, if ever, the ones to actually fix things when the problems are large-scale. Rather, they inspire many others to get involved and address the problem together. In the real world, that's how things change.

The arguments made in this article are deeply rooted in the Hero Narrative. If, however, we understand the true function of a hero, then we find ourselves feeling grateful for the inspiration Gandhi provided, rather than being offended that his story got a lot of attention.

What effect did Rosa Parks' arrest actually have? The arrest *on its own* meant little. Several others had been arrested in similar circumstances in Montgomery before her. Her arrest had three huge and overarching effects, though, all of which are interwoven.

First, it provided a test case for the court system. Second, it served as the catalyst for a one-day bus boycott, which was so successful that it turned into a boycott that was kept up for over a year.

The last reason is perhaps the most important: Rosa Parks' arrest was widely publicized. Virtually the whole nation saw it on the evening news. Here was a diminutive, dignified, well-dressed Black woman standing between two large White police officers, being arrested. "Why?", we asked. The answer was that she was being prosecuted for not giving up a seat that she had paid for on a public bus.

Across the nation, there was a small shift. Many people were forced to examine and re-evaluate previously held assumptions about 'the way things are'. It didn't fix the problem, but it did shift things slightly and significantly, and the flames of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States were fanned.

Rosa Parks seemed to agree that her own action was not the most significant part of what happened that day. "At the time I was arrested I had no idea it would turn into this," she wrote. "It was just a day like any other day. The only thing that made it significant was that the masses of the people joined in."

Leaders and heroes can be extremely important, but their importance lies in their ability to inspire and challenge the rest of us, not in their ability to directly right the wrongs.

In fact, heroic figures and charismatic leaders are not always necessary for change, as demonstrated by the Egyptian chapter of the Arab Awakening (known in much of the world as the Arab Spring), where a coalition of activist groups overthrew the Mubarak regime through non-violent resistance. A leader without a movement is ineffectual. A movement without a charismatic, uniting leader is rare, but can still be effective.

One could make the counter-argument that it is moneyed powers, not movements, that really change things. Certainly it would be ridiculous to deny that top-down power and financial resources are strong tools. Clearly, they are. They are not the only kinds of power, however; and bottom-up, grassroots nonviolence can and often does defeat them, even in the face of formidable obstacles. Just between the years of 2000 and 2006, organized non-violent civilian movements successfully challenged entrenched power in Serbia, Madagascar, Georgia, Ukraine, Lebanon and Nepal.

Even top-down power depends on the cooperation of the masses. Étienne de la Boétie, a young 16th-century political theorist asked in a treatise he wrote as a law

student, "Obviously there is no need of fighting to overcome this single tyrant, for he is automatically defeated if the country refuses consent to its own enslavement." He has a point there, one that was picked up by many political theorists after him, including Robespierre, and later, the drafters of the United States Declaration of Independence. The top-down power is always predicated on the bottom-up power. If well-organized and committed, the latter eventually wins.

Still, the Hero Narrative is deep in us, in spite of the fact that it is demonstrably untrue. It informs many of the self-defeating voices in our heads, the ones that ask, "What difference could my tiny efforts make in the face of such a huge problem?"

In fact, those small efforts are the best shot we have at having a large impact. They are the best way to begin addressing a problem. Though the charge against such small actions is that they don't matter, it turns out that the exact opposite is true: they are the most pragmatic approach we can take.

If we cling to the myth that large scale change is effected by dramatic heroic actions, we risk missing opportunities for real impact. As it turns out, movements are more effective than heroes. And movements don't need lots of leaders; they need lots of participants.[4] In the end, the real power lies with us: normal people making small decisions to engage.

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[4] One of my favorite illustrations of this concept is a video by Derek Sivers, the founder of CD Baby, depicting the growth of a movement through the metaphor of a young man dancing freely, badly, and infectiously at a music festival. Derek concentrates on the importance of the first follower, and there are good lessons to be taken from it: http://sivers.org/ff

Small Change˝

"We get to be a ripple in the water."
- The Indigo Girls, "Perfect World"

So we know what happened after Rosa Parks was arrested. The history books tell us that a group of pastors met the following evening at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, and the Montgomery Improvement Association was formed four days later at Mt. Zion AME Church. They elected a young Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. to be the president, apparently, as Rosak Parks wrote in her autobiography, because "he was so new to Montgomery and to civil rights work that he hadn't been there long enough to make any strong friends or enemies." We know that position launched him to national prominence and that these events combined ignited the Civil Rights Movement (though, of course, that work had been going on for generations). We know that Rosa Parks became an icon of courage and that foundational changes came to the United States in the wake of her actions.

Now I want to look in the other direction on the timeline of Mrs. Parks' life. As I mentioned before, she was trained in non-violent activism at the Highlander Center the summer before she was first arrested in 1955. We know that she had worked for the Montgomery NAACP as its secretary since 1943. History also tells us that she married her husband Raymond Parks in 1935 and that he was already involved with anti-racism activism when they married.

It is interesting to me that for eight years Raymond went to organizing meetings about race issues and Rosa stayed home. Apparently, Raymond Parks discouraged his wife from going to NAACP meetings because he said it was too dangerous. When she finally did go, however, she got involved quickly, though her stated reason for doing so may make us cringe, looking back from our current cultural context. "I was the only woman there,

and they said they needed a secretary," she wrote in her autobiography, "and I was too timid to say no."

I can't help but wonder, though, who invited Raymond Parks to *his* first meeting. That bit of information is lost to time, but I like to imagine the conversation between Ray and Chuck, the friend I've created for him, going something like this:

Chuck: Ray, what are you doing Wednesday night?
Ray: I don't know.
Chuck: I think you should come over to my house for a meeting.
Ray: Maybe. I've got some stuff to do around the house.
Chuck: I'm bringing Bonnie's pecan pie.
Ray: Really? All right, I'll be there.

Granted, that is entirely fabricated, but isn't it possible that the initial conversation went something like that? Even if it was more dramatic than that—a passionate appeal to get involved based with manifest injustices argued compellingly by one friend to another—it was still very likely a conversation between two friends that got Raymond Parks to that meeting. And I kind of like the pecan pie story. We don't know for sure, but it could have been that small of a factor.

Looking at my own life, I see many corners on my own trajectory, times when I was headed one way but ended up taking a turn in another direction, that hinge on such small influences. My decision to pursue music professionally rather than focus on mediation, for instance, or meeting and later marrying my wife, or choosing to invite my son Mason into the world after wrestling for some time with whether or not we wanted to have children. Each of those decisions hinged on small conversations or other influences, most of which seemed quite insignificant at the time.

In the summer of 1987, I was working in Montreat, North Carolina, for the conference center there. In those days they brought in about 100 college students each summer to

help run the place (it is many more than that now), and, as I mentioned before, I was hired to run the Audio-Visual crew.

In my free time, I liked to hang around with some of the older staffers who had a band. It changed names and personnel a bit each year, but that particular summer, Will Nash, Bill Graham, Patrick Miller, and sometimes Wade Powell made up the band. Even though I wasn't really a good enough guitar player to be in the band, they were kind enough to occasionally let me sit in on a song or two. I admired them all greatly, and I still do.

One night they let me play a few songs while they took their set break at the Town Pump, a local watering hole in Black Mountain. I plugged in my acoustic guitar, nervous but thrilled, and sang a James Taylor song and a couple of others. While I was playing, Patrick, who was then finishing up a degree in classical guitar performance at the College of Wooster but also played a mean electric, wandered up to stand beside the stage and listen. When I finished my three songs, he cocked his head sideways so his unruly bangs were out of his eyes and said, "That was good, Dave. You could *do* this."

"Do what?"

"I mean, like, do *this*."

Looking back, it seems like a rather low bar to have set, but at the time I was blown away. Patrick, one of the best guitarists I had ever met, a guy who had the same relationship to cool that Midas had to gold, thought that I was a good enough guitar player and singer to play $2 door gigs in smoky bars to the backs of people's heads while they watched a baseball game at the other end of the bar. That, believe it or not, sounded to me like a dream come true, and it was the first time I had seriously considered the possibility. I went home and did the math: how many shows would I have to do and what would I have to make to realistically support a simple lifestyle?

Many years later, after my music career was established, interviewers have sometimes asked me when I knew I wanted to be a professional musician. I think that's the wrong question. If I ask a hundred 15-year-olds how many of them would like to have their life's work be making up songs and singing them for

people, lots of hands will go up. If I then ask them how many of them think that's possible for them personally, however, I get a whole lot fewer hands.

I know. I've done it.

The revelation for me wasn't that I wanted to do that, but that it might actually be possible. I had played guitar steadily for five years by the time Patrick dropped that casual comment in the Town Pump, but it opened a door to a life that I hadn't thought was possible. I still had to choose to go through the door and down the road, but that offhand comment pointed the way.

There are analogies to activism in that story. Many of us want to have a positive impact, but we don't get started because it doesn't occur to us that it is actually possible for us—specifically *you*, not 'people'—to have a significant impact.

That story illustrates something else as well. It was such a casual comment for Patrick. I'm sure he didn't remember it a week later. Yet here I am 26 years later, talking about it as a key moment in my life story. It was a small act, encouraging me like that, but it led to an entire career. Certainly there were many other influences that led me into the path I've been walking, but that one mattered. Small efforts very often do.

A cynic might respond by saying, "And they very often don't." That's true too, but it's irrelevant. I am not arguing that all small changes lead to big ones. In my experience, some don't. They just evaporate. What I would forcefully argue, however, is that all big changes are made up of millions of small ones, many of which are determinative; the big change could not have happened without the little one.

One small effort can, and often does, have a huge effect, especially when it is combined with many other small efforts in the same direction. Knowing that leaves me passionate about the value of pursuing small changes, doing the simple things right in front of us. Inviting the friend to the meeting. Nudging someone down a path. Calling the governor's office to weigh in on a bill. Getting a few friends together to talk about how we can have an impact on a given community issue that concerns

us. Going to engage the people you're having a problem with. Making a pecan pie.

One of the most important small decisions we make, of course, is where we spend our money. If we are troubled by the fact that much of our clothing is made by sweat shop labor, our twenty-first-century form of slavery, then we can take the trouble to do an internet search on which brands are 'sweat shop free', or buy more of our clothes at thrift shops, or simply buy fewer clothes. If our college or faith community is printing up t-shirts for an event, we can buy them from a company that is committed to ethical labor practices. It's actually not terribly hard, and it makes a huge difference in the lives of the people making those shirts.[5]

Likewise with investments, it doesn't make much sense to let a company borrow money from you to do things you object to. There are investment brokers who specialize in responsible investing and can customize your portfolio to align with the issues you care about.

My sister Kathy was a heavy smoker for many years, and several attempts to quit had failed. In the end, the tipping point for her was her outrage at cigarette companies intentionally marketing to minors. She decided she simply could not give those companies any more of her money. Where we spend our money is sometimes a small decision, but small decisions very often add up.

You may make small efforts to resist (or at least refuse to support) something you object to, or you may make positive efforts to support something you *do* believe in. In both cases, the small change can be hugely significant. The illustrations for this are as myriad as the people doing the work, but one of my favorites is the story of Jo Ann Robinson, another hero of the Montgomery bus boycott, but one we hear much less about than Rosa Parks.

Mrs. Parks was arrested on a Thursday evening, on her way home from work. The news spread quickly through the

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[5] For more information on sweat shop free products, sweatfreeshop.com is a good place to start.

Black community, and that evening, an attorney named Fred Gray returned a call from Jo Ann Robinson and she told him of Mrs. Parks' arrest. They discussed how best to respond, and the two of them agreed that the Women's Political Council should call for a one-day bus boycott. By midnight, Jo Ann Robinson and two of the students she taught at Alabama State University were printing flyers. On an old school mimeograph machine, they ran 52,500 copies of a flyer (17,500 sheets of paper, three to a page) calling for Montgomery's Black community to stay off of the buses on Monday.

Ms. Robinson and the two students ran copies until 4 AM and strategized about distribution until 7AM; then she went to teach her 8AM class. The flyers were spread all over town through the network of the Montgomery Women's Political Council. Local ministers had a meeting on Friday morning and got behind the boycott as well. In church on Sunday morning, the Black community was again informed of the boycott and encouraged to participate.

As important as that all-night printing sprint was, it was only another chapter in the work Jo Ann Robinson had been doing for years as a leader in the Women's Political Council of Montgomery. The Council had networks in place that provided structure for organizing the boycott once the decision was made. They had actually been planning a boycott for some time already, but had not yet chosen a time to launch it. Rosa Parks' arrest provided the catalyst, but the plans and the framework had already been developed. It is hard to imagine that the boycott could have been so successful if that had not been the case. I suspect that there was very little that could be considered dramatic in that behind-the-scenes work, and there were many, many people involved whose small contributions have been forgotten, but they were essential.

The problems we face as communities, as a nation, and as a world are inarguably daunting. But as individuals, we need to scale our thinking down, at least at first, so that we can take action. Rosa Parks didn't decide to go to jail in 1943. She decided to go to a meeting. Then she decided to help out. Even before her arrest, her work was essential to the movement, just

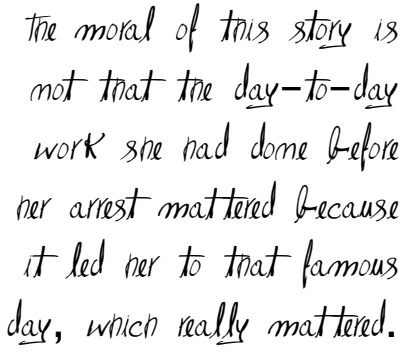
as the work of Jo Ann Robinson and the Women's Political Council was, even though Mrs. Robinson was never arrested. And what of the two students who helped run those copies? They occupy a significant place in history, but I can't find their names written down anywhere. All we know is that they were young men who were enrolled in the class Jo Ann Robinson taught that Friday morning.

But there's more. Not only did Rosa Parks do years of day-to-day work for the cause *before* she was arrested; she immediately went back to that work afterwards. Many people will recognize a photograph of her being fingerprinted. When I search the internet for 'Rosa Parks arrest', it is the first image that comes up on the screen.

What many people do not know is that this photograph is not from her arrest for refusing to give up her seat but from a subsequent arrest in February, 1956 when 115 boycott leaders were arrested after the boycott was deemed illegal under Alabama State Law.

While the boycott was going on, people who were participating still had to get to work, so the organizers of the boycott purchased and accepted donations of six station wagons. They also organized 325 private citizens to help with transportation and worked with the local Black taxis to ensure that everyone had a ride to work. Mrs. Parks volunteered as a dispatcher, answering the phone and organizing pick-ups and drop-offs for boycotters. It is her arrest for that work that was captured in this photograph.

The moral of this story is not that the day-to-day work she had done before her arrest mattered because it led her to that famous day, which *really* mattered. Rosa Parks, it seems to me, understood that her most important work *was* the day-to-day work she did rather than the much-publicized moment for which she is remembered. She put most of her energy into that work for years before and after her celebrated arrest.



We are often immobilized by the enormity of problems we face. We sit still because we can't imagine doing anything on a large enough scale to have a meaningful impact. We think that large problems demand large efforts at correction, and that's true. But we forget that those large efforts are almost always made up of millions of small efforts. Perhaps *your* small contribution is essential to a large-scale change.

I received a small package in the mail one day, a couple of weeks after a workshop I led at a conference in North Carolina. One youth group that had attended had come up with a new motto on the way home in the van and had made up some t-shirts that sum it up pretty well. The shirts read, "Be the pecan pie you wish to see in the world."

About Homeless Fonts

The inset quotes, or 'pull quotes', in this book are in a font called 'Guillermo', which can be purchased at homelessfonts.org. The font is based on the handwriting of a man named Guillermo, who lives in Barcelona, Spain. Homelessfonts is an initiative of the Arrels Foundation, which is creating fonts in partnership with people experiencing homelessness in Barcelona, using the same unique handwriting that they use to make themselves visible on the street.

This font and several others can be purchased at homelessfonts.org.

David LaMotte

David LaMotte, the author of this book, has been a performing songwriter for his entire adult life. He has toured and performed professionally in forty-eight of the fifty states, and in dozens of countries on five continents. His eleven albums, two children's books and other items are available at **www.davidlamotte.com.** He hopes to release his twelfth album in 2016.

Currently, about half of his work is public speaking rather than singing, leading workshops, keynoting conferences and helping people wrestle with how to have a positive impact on the world around them. For more information about his tour schedule, workshops, etc., please visit his web site. David is also the Clerk (Chairperson) of the AFSC Nobel Peace Prize Nominating Committee, and the President of PEG Partners, Inc., a non-profit organization he co-founded in 2004 to support schools and libraries in promoting literacy, critical thought, and artistic expression in Guatemala.

If you or your organization, college, faith community or civic group would like for David to speak, either in person or via teleconference, please contact Dryad Publishing, Inc. at **booking@davidlamotte.com**.

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