

# Willing to Be Disturbed... Flipping the Biased Script of Our Standardized Curriculum

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Many of us have been using Margaret Wheatley's excerpt, *Willing to Be Disturbed*, to introduce conversations about norm setting and an understanding that we grow most when we are willing to challenge our often comfortably held assumptions and understandings. I'm wondering today how this process of challenging our individual assumptions gets translated into questions and challenges of the curriculum we are often mandated to teach.

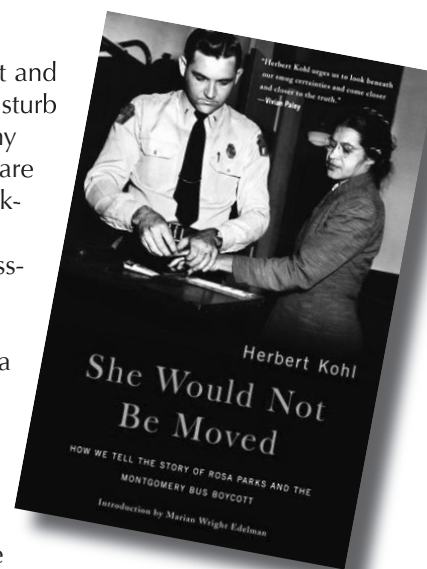
In particular, I'm thinking today of the way Rosa Parks gets treated in our classrooms and in the media. Mrs. Parks died yesterday and was described in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as the "Montgomery, AL seamstress...whose simple, spontaneous act of defiance...lent a spark to a movement..." Describing Mrs. Parks and her actions on that day in 1955 has long been a staple of classroom instruction, especially in February. However, the standard script about Mrs. Parks is not only simplistic and comfortable, it is disempowering. Mrs. Parks' actions were neither simply spontaneous nor the result of her exhaustion after a hard day's work.

Being willing to be disturbed in the case of how we teach about Rosa Parks for me means being willing to flip the script and write a letter to the editor. In classrooms, I hope it will mean an analysis of Mrs. Parks' history as an organizer and activist for civil rights, who also happened to be a seamstress. A closer look at the facts will show that Mrs. Parks and a number of other women had been put off of buses for their refusal to move before Dec. 1, 1955. In fact, some of these African-American women were members of the Woman's Political Council (WPC) and had resolved to fight segregation on the buses as far back as 1949! Mrs. Parks' refusal to move and her subsequent arrest were selected as the case to launch the bus boycott because of Mrs. Parks' proven leadership ability. This story of collective decision making, willed risk and coordinated action is more dramatic than the story of a tired or angry individual who sparked a demonstration (Kohl, 2005).

I hope our script will also introduce students to the Highlander School in Knoxville, TN, where Mrs. Parks, Dr. King and countless others attended trainings and developed strategies designed to lead the struggle against racism in this country. And finally, I hope we will begin to ask students why they think the "official story" promoted about Mrs. Parks is inaccurate. Having this conversation with our middle and high school students will open up questions about other parts of "the story" that our textbooks

are wrong about and will hopefully disturb and engage many of the kids who are now simply marking time in so many of our classrooms.

Flipping the script about Rosa Parks in many ways means flipping the script about the role of our schools. Will we begin to acknowledge the role of our schools as sites where inequity and the status quo are reinforced? Will we begin teaching students to become critically thinking citizens who are willing to be disturbed and disturb the system? Will we open the doors to our students' questions about the curriculum and its inherent bias? If we do, it won't be easy to return to page 92 and answer the questions at the end of the chapter. Once our kids experience the power of an authentic curriculum powered by their own questions, it's likely they'll demand more of us as their teachers and as citizens. Motivating our kids as co-designers of their own learning based on an accurate understanding of the power of collaboration seems like a fitting way to honor Mrs. Parks' legacy and put our willingness to be disturbed to an authentic test. □



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#### For more information:

- Horton, M. and Freire, P. (1990). *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*, Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Horton, M. (1998). *The Long Haul: An Autobiography*, New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Kohl, H. (2005). *She Would Not Be Moved: How We Tell the Story of the Montgomery Bus Boycott*, New York, NY: The New Press.
- Wheatley, M. (2001). *Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Return Hope to the Future*, San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Kohler Publishers, Inc.