Chapter 4: Turning Evictions into Benedictions: Did Gandhi Know? Commemoration of the 07 June 1893 Mohandas K. Gandhi Eviction from a British Empire Train on the Pietermaritzburg Railway Station

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Abstract

The eviction of Mohandas K. Gandhi from a British Empire Train on the Pietermaritzburg Railway Station on the 07 June 1893, is a turning point in history. His main point is that there are similar turning points in history, such as happened to Ida Bell Wells ten years earlier, in Tennessee, and the Youth of the 1976 and UDF revolutions, and Claudette Colvin and Rosa Parks in 1955, in the United States. Similar events in history, where individuals resisted repression and oppression, and struggled for justice, explicitly serve later generations as benedictions.

Keywords: Mohandas K. Gandhi, eviction, turning points in history, Kairos moment, Dietrich Bonhoeffer

I

We are here for a commemoration today, and we are blessed. That blessing begins with a question. With two actually.

How does one single act become a turning point in history? And did Mahatma Gandhi know that might happen?

In many ways, in what we have seen this morning in the re-enactment of Mahatma Gandhi's eviction from that train, and heard in the reflections on it makes something of that clear. It impresses upon us what a single moment in history can set in motion. It can also be true of other such moments of course, relatively small acts for those who perpetrate them, but momentous for those upon whom it is perpetrated and sometimes for history itself.

One thinks of the apartheid government's fateful decision on Afrikaans as medium of instruction in Black schools that set off the Soweto revolution. Or, more recently, the slap in the face a young vegetable vendor received from an irate police officer in Tunis. In protest to the constant police harassment, the Mohammad Bouazizi set himself on fire, becoming the spark of what became known as the Arab Spring. That one decision, that one act became historically enormously consequential, but only because of the revolutionary consciousness of the people, the dissatisfaction with their situations of oppression and exploitation, and their readiness for resistance.

That is how one, single act becomes a turning point in history.

In such cases, that happens to one person who takes a conscious decision that for them, personally, a moment of truth has arrived. When they understand that that one act of individual injustice is, in fact, the individual, personalised expression of systematized, structuralized injustice perpetrated upon a whole people, or whole groups of a population. The personal indignity inflicted upon them perhaps once, or twice, perhaps because of their station in life, were indignities and humiliations inflicted a thousand-fold upon a whole people, in a thousand ways every single day.

It brings them to a new understanding. The issue is no longer that it happened to me, an educated, well-dressed, respectable middle-class person, intending no harm to anyone, interested only in my upward way in life. The issue now is that they realise that for all people who look like them, whatever their status, this is the normal way of life. They are not the exception. They have just become the completely unexceptional rule. They hate what is happening to them, not because it hurt their ego, ignored their status, insulted their personal dignity, but because they realise that this was an assault upon their human beingness. It is structural, systemic, psychological, physical violence brought home, made intensely personal.

The level of education and status, however prided in Black communities, are no guarantee, and offer no protection against systemic, white supremacist hatred. That is what happened to Mahatma Gandhi on June 7, 1893, and that is how an eviction from a train became an earthquake that would

fundamentally change the way oppressed masses across the world would rise up against their oppressors. That is the beginnings of how nonviolent militancy, resolute conviction, and unearned suffering would become the pulsating wave of a revolution that would change the shape of the world.

It was only an eviction from a train, but an eviction can indeed become an earthquake.

II

This happened to Mahatma Gandhi in 1893. But ten years prior, it happened to a young woman in Tennessee, in the United States. Her name was Ida Bell Wells (Bay 2009). Born after the emancipation of enslaved Africans, but in the middle of the white backlash against what was called 'Reconstruction', Ida Wells was a schoolteacher at the time, before she became the formidable, world-renowned journalist who would make history. Like the well-dressed, well-mannered attorney from Durban, Ida Wells, too, was on a train. She was seated in what was called the 'ladies car' in the first-class section of the train.

Railroad authorities at the time understood the risks for women passengers travelling by train. For that reason, a special 'ladies' car' was reserved for first-class female passengers. It offered more comfort and more safety. As important, it offered a quiet and peaceful ride, which for a scholarly woman, with reading and writing to do, was a natural choice, if she could afford it.

Most of all, though, Ida Wells considered herself a lady, a status white supremacist society vehemently denied her, because of the colour of her skin. It would go any lengths to make sure that that status would only be claimed by women with a white skin. That, however, at the deepest level, would become the core issue here: Ida Wells' insistence that she was a lady. The conductor refused to punch her ticket, ordering her to leave her seat, and the car, and find a seat in the 'coloured' section of the train. She refused.

Some commentators make the point that Ida faced some unspoken psychological pressures, which in a racialized society, inevitably have racist roots. A certain manner of behaviour is expected from a 'lady'. A lady is reserved, demure, at all times. A lady does not shout in public; she does not stoop to the levels of public disputes. A lady has no interest in politics, that is a man's world. She concerns herself with the more genteel pursuits of life. A lady does not concern herself with issues like rights – her position of submission to the 'rights of man' is, after all, divinely ordained. A lady is dignified at all times, and if she is, she will be treated with respect. If she behaves otherwise, as the expression now goes, 'all bets are off'. Being forced from her protected place,

Ida Wells would now be at the mercy of whatever dangers could befall her as a woman in the unprotected section of the train. But that did not matter, because she was, after all, not considered a 'lady'. Her safety was not white society's concern.

It is a valid point. In a racist, patriarchal society, all this genteelness, ladylikeness, and civilised propriety, are considered the natural attributes of white women. Black women, no matter how hard they tried, by their very nature, could never achieve these levels of 'ladylikeness'. Their very blackness made it impossible. If they tried, they were labelled 'uppity', a Black person who did not 'know their place'. Reaching for the impossible, for something the Almighty himself (and theirs is always a male God) had ordained beyond their reach. Hence the disparaging image of the 'angry Black woman' in vogue to this day.

On that day in September 1883, however, Ida Bell Wells took on, challenged, and overturned every racial myth, every racial epithet, every patriarchal platitude about Black women. She fought back. She refused to leave her seat. She would not, because she was a lady, not on white people's say-so, but on God's say-so and hence on her own terms.

When, as was inevitable, force followed, she still resisted, refusing to vacate her seat. When the altercation got physically rough, the conductor violently laying hands on her, she sank her teeth into his hand. Finally, the conductor called in the help of the baggage handler, and that of another white man, who he had to fetch from the normal first-class car. Ida Wells is described as a 'petite, trim woman'. Yet it took three grown men to prise her from her seat and evict her from the ladies' car.

Ida Wells resisted, because she was a lady, and no one, and not any law or rule made by white society, would make her believe otherwise, or could take that away from her. She fought not just for herself. She fought for the dignity of all Black women, and for the right of all of us to claim our God-given humanity.

When the women of the Free State began their struggle against the Pass Laws in 1913, their demands were clear. They were resolute, protested and marched despite the risks; they were beaten and imprisoned, they were not afraid. Their key argument rested not on patronizing, masculine pity for their femininity, but on the right to dignity. This is what they wrote:

> The Pass laws lower the dignity of women and throw to pieces every element of respect to which they are entitled (S.A. History Online).

Note the carefully chosen words: dignity, and respect, not what they crave, or humbly seek white society to grant them, but *to which they are entitled*. Imagine committing oneself to those words and goals, in the Free State, in 1913!

Later, Sol Plaatjie wrote of them in words of admiration that remind me of the youth of the 1976 and UDF revolutions: 'They are determined', he said, 'to fight the pass laws no matter where they might be …. They are fighting for the freedom of the women in the Free State …'. Then, with a sense of awe, he added, 'They don't even care if they die in jail' (S.A. History Online).

That might not be the white, racist definition of 'ladylikeness', but it is the perfect definition of courage and dignity, when one is willing to stand up and fight for that which is right, for the well-being and freedom of future generations, for the dignity and worthiness of all humankind.

That is what kept Ida B. Wells clinging to her seat that September day in 1883, turning that eviction into an earthquake. That one, single moment spurred Ida Wells on to become one of the fiercest, most formidable fighters for justice of her times. Like almost no one else, she fought against one the vilest expressions of white supremacist hatred in the United States at that time, namely the practice of lynching.

As her campaign grew in power and influence, her insistence and refusal to compromise on her fight against this hideous show of white power alienated even some of her male comrades. One, withdrawing his support in favour of a more genteel approach, called her 'a bull in a china shop'. Yet she remained steadfast, clinging to the commitment she made that day when she clung so ferociously to her seat: 'I am committed to do something about every form of injustice and discrimination whatever the matter happened to be'.

Ida Wells would not allow racist expectations, definitions, and depictions to determine her worth as a Black woman, or her limits as a fighter for justice, freedom, and the dignity of her people.

III

It is that same spirit of revolutionary dignity that moved within Mrs Rosa Parks, in Montgomery, Alabama, on December 1, 1955. That was another eviction, from a bus this time, that led to yet another movement of mass, nonviolent militancy, a turning point that changed the course of history, and catapulted a young Black Baptist pastor called Martin Luther King Jr., into that history, recalling and recapturing the legacies of Ida B Wells and Mahatma Gandhi. By remaining in her seat, Rosa parks stood her ground, and she did that for the

dignity of Black people everywhere.

But on March 2, 1955, a full nine months before Rosa Parks, there was a young woman called Claudette Colvin, another person who, encountering history, turned that moment into a kairos moment, a moment of truth, of discernment, of decision and of commitment, even though it upturned her young life (Hose 2011).

It was in that same city, Montgomery, Alabama; it was the same bus service; it was the same segregated seating on those buses. Claudette was seated in the so-called coloured section. Next to her was seated an older Black woman, a Mrs. Hamilton. They were in the 'coloured' section, but the rule was that if the bus was full, and white people got on, those in the 'coloured' seats should give up their seats for those whites. The conductor told them so and ordered them to get up.

Mrs. Hamilton did get up, to be offered a seat by a young Black man. Claudette refused. Fifteen-year-old Claudette Colvin was the first to refuse to stand up from her seat on the bus in Montgomery, a full nine months before Rosa Parks did so. Claudette Colvin suffered for this brave act of resistance. She was manhandled, arrested, imprisoned, and after her release was shunned by parts of her community, because, she was told, by being 'uppity' with this white man on the bus, she was making things harder for all Black folks in Montgomery. Claudette was not politically unaware. She knew what she was doing in defying white power on the bus that evening. So she remained seated.

But here's the thing. Because she was a pregnant teenager, she was not considered by the NAACP and the churches to be the right kind of person to be held up as the face of black resistance in the South: 'Civil Rights leaders felt she was an inappropriate symbol for a test case'. Like Mary the unmarried mother of Jesus was shunned by her community and became an embarrassment to Joseph, so that she found it necessary to flee to her aunt Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, miles away, Claudette, young, pregnant, and from the wrong side of town, was too much of an embarrassment to be the model for the struggle. Mrs. Rosa Parks did become this model. So even then, the question was not only skin colour. It was also class.

But here is the testimony of Claudette Colvin afterward: 'History kept me stuck to my seat. I felt the hand of Harriet Tubman pushing down on one shoulder and Sojourner Truth pushing down on the other' (Adler 2009). Colvin was handcuffed, arrested, and forcibly removed from the bus. Though her story was ignored and suppressed for a long time, Colvin remembered why she did what she did. 'But I made a personal statement, too, one that [Parks] didn't make

and probably couldn't have made. Mine was the first cry for justice, and a loud one'.

Hers was not just teenage belligerence or the touchiness of a pregnant woman at the end of a long day. She felt the hand of history on her shoulder. She heard the voices of illustrious ancestors, fighters for freedom spurring her on, pushing her into history, making her stand up for justice by holding her down in her seat.

It still fills me with a certain sense of wonder to think that in this process it is almost as if God had given the freedom movement in the US a second chance, despite the middle-class, judgmental reluctance that made it shun Claudette Colvin nine months before. My sense of awe is deepened when I reflect that, even in giving the movement a second chance, God's insistence on a woman as the channel of agency is undeterred.

So even though her story was ignored for years, Claudette Colvin, forerunner of the children of Birmingham in 1963, and of the children of Soweto 1976, sowed the seeds of the movement that became the Civil Rights struggle in the United States. Another eviction that became an earthquake, that turned history on its head and set a people on the path toward freedom.

IV

So, what is it then that moved Mahatma Gandhi and Ida B. Wells, Claudette Colvin, and Rosa Parks? What is it that can turn an eviction, such an ordinary thing in every racist, exploitative, discriminatory society, into an earthquake that changes the course of history?

That is because these evictions mean so much more to a liberated mind conscientised by a revolutionary self-awareness; a sense of history and a sense of one's place in it. A mind sensitive to the kairotic moment, that understands that it is not history itself that by some miracle becomes a turning point but becomes so when human agency takes a hand in history, when a living, breathing person, with courage, faith, and fortitude, themselves become that turning point.

When, as they refuse to give up their seat, they refuse to take the easy way out. Why not avoid the unpleasantness, the embarrassment on top of the embarrassment, since one knows that the power dynamics at play have already determined the outcome, and that cannot ever be good? Why not simply move to the other car, or to the other seat? Why choose to start a day, which will surely bring much more stringent challenges, with a fight over a seat? Or at the end of

the day, when one needs some respite from the hostilities of the white power structures one had to cope with all day long? Why do this, while one is not even sure that one would get support from one's fellow Black passengers, who, more likely than not, have resigned themselves to these humiliations so inevitable to Black life in a racist society? Why, sick and tired of fighting the same fight, one does not just let go?

Because for a liberated mind, set on freedom, that being sick and tired, has turned into Fannie Lou Hamer's 'sick and tired of being sick and tired'. Because for such a liberated mind, dignity demands not only breaking the mould, but breaking the chains.

Because for such a liberated mind, an eviction is never just an eviction. That liberated, conscientised mind knows: those evictions are never just evictions from a seat, or a bus, or from a train. They are evictions from that long, honourable, ancestral line of fighters for justice, freedom and dignity, where your right to that place is now being tested. They are evictions from my right to that freedom, justice and dignity. They are a dislodgement from the rightful acknowledgement of my humanbeingness and of my worth.

An eviction is not just to *show* me my proper place on a train or a bus but to *put me in my place*. And it is not a just different place, it is an inferior place. It is not just a separate, different place on a bus or a train; it is what they consider my place on the scale of human worthiness and respect. It has not so much to do with rules on systems of transportation. It has everything to do with systemic injustice, with laws and structures enforcing superiority and inferiority with levels of aggression that will stop at nothing. People of faith also consider this: Since I am a child of God, created in the image and likeness of God, these evictions are not just an attack upon my human dignity, they are an assault upon then holiness and worthiness of the God who created me.

Those evictions, it was argued, were legal, necessary for what they called 'law and order'. Mahatma Gandhi knew that. But he also knew that 'order' is not the confused state of legalised lawlessness and abusive power, that lethal combination of what is called 'law and order'. Order prevails when justice is done and there is no confusion about what is right and wrong in society. Theologian and personal friend of Dietrich Bonhoeffer that courageous freedom fighter, martyred in the struggle against Hitler's Nazis, Paul Lehmann, wrote, and I agree with him: 'Freedom is the presupposition and the condition of order: order is not the presupposition and condition of freedom. Justice is the foundation and criterion of law; law is not the foundation and criterion of justice. These are the proper priorities of politics' (Lehmann 1975: 235).

Did Gandhi know this, pondering his future and that of his people that cold night in that train station? I think he did.

That is why he also knew this. It's never just an eviction. It is an eviction from my dreams of ever becoming what my gifts and talents would allow me to become. It is a denial, at every level of society, in every stage of my life, in every way possible, of my right to claim, as my birth right, what others claim for themselves, not by giftedness, or qualification, or suitability, but by skin pigmentation alone.

It's never just an eviction. It is always the open door to the violence that is innate to racism and supremacy. It sets in motion that chain of violence that is not just the justification, but the *raison d'etre* of supremacy, and the hunger for power. The power to evict is without fail, and without question, also the power to lynch, to massacre, to genocide. The power to evict indigenous peoples from their land – from Native Americans to Africans to the Palestinians – has always been, without fail and without question, to this day, the power displace, destroy, and annihilate.

It's never just an eviction. It is a demonstration of impunity that rests upon assumed exceptionalism. It's never just an eviction. It is always a particular moment in an ongoing feeding frenzy of unbridled, savage appetites, their power gorging itself on my powerlessness.

It's never just an eviction. South Africa's people today are such a traumatised people because we are, when all is said and done, an evicted people. Evicted from ownership of our land, evicted from the remembrance of our struggles and disowned from the sacrifices the generations before us have made. Evicted from the vast chambers of wealth this country has, by imperialists and colonialists; by apartheid, its disciples and its beneficiaries, and now by the neo-colonialist inheritors of the apartheid mind-set. Disowned, evicted from our revolution because our revolution has been claimed by faux revolutionaries who pretended to be our liberators and sold us back into the bondage of our previous slave masters, and not even to the highest bidder. Evicted from the safe shelter against impoverishment, violence, discrimination, and the ravages of corruption any decent, genuinely democratic state owes its citizens. Evicted, disinherited from the shades of the tree of freedom fed by the blood of those who sacrificed so much, we wander aimlessly under the scorching sun in a political wilderness. Evicted from our proper place in history, and from the joyous company of those who fought battles for freedom and won, we are now left, orphans of a stolen dream, beggars for a future, under the heel of a pharaoh who looks just like us. And all this with a brazenness that stuns the mind. We are an evicted people. I

wonder if Mandela knows.

Evictions, if we comply, if we passively submit, if we do not resist, are the spiritual abandonment of our human dignity, our God-given rights, our claim to freedom, our right to a future, for ourselves and for our children. It is accepting, without a murmur, a life without hope, our souls left groping in the dark, drenched in unnecessary regrets that will shame generations to come.

Did Gandhi know this? Did Ida B. Wells, Rosa Parks, and Claudette Colvin, evicted from that train, that bus, that seat? Yes, I think they did. That is why they turned an eviction first into an earthquake, and then into a benediction. And that is why we are here today, and that is why we are blessed.

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