

Dr. Bass, when we broke you were talking about Montgomery. Would you like to tell us a little bit about your impressions?

Yes. This came at a time in my life when I was teaching the young people and feeling very despondent about things that were happening in the society. But then the incident in Montgomery hit the newspapers. It seems as though Rosa Parks, a seamstress, sat down on a bus in a spot where she was not supposed to sit and was asked to move. And she refused to do so, and they arrested her. This wonderful God-fearing woman was arrested because she refused to give up her seat.

And of course, when this happened, the news spread all over town, especially in the Black community. They just couldn't believe this, and they had reached a point. I guess it was a breaking point. And so they all rallied together at the church, which was the focal point for most activities in the Black community.

And so they met at the church and planned this strategy, what they were going to do because they're not going to take this anymore. And they finally came to a conclusion that they would boycott. If they couldn't ride in dignity, they wouldn't ride at all. And so they walked. They walk for 11 months, 11 months.

No one rode the buses, and it created a havoc with the economic community. And people were beginning to say, let's settle this thing, you see. And of course, the Supreme Court took it under advisement, and finally they acted and said that it was illegal, it was unconstitutional, that they could not do this on public transportation. And so the bus line was integrated.

But out of all of this came that charismatic figure called Martin Luther King. He came to the forefront. He was most articulate. He could state the case clearly, and he came with a new philosophy which astounded so many of us in which he said to the people that we will wear them down with our capacity for love. And I thought that guy was a weirdo, really. I said, how can you talk about loving these people when they're going to beat you, and curse you, and spit on you, and all this sort of thing?

I couldn't understand this. It took me a little while to become educated. But he mobilized those people in a way that they'd never been mobilized before, and he offered, I felt, for the first time, a program to the larger society which, if they would embrace, would have been really a salvation to many of our problems today. But unfortunately, they didn't embrace it, not to the degree that they should have.

But nevertheless, it gave hope to a lot of people, and I was one of them. And he came to Philadelphia one day in the 30s. I'll never forget that. I took my children from school to the playground where he was going to speak. And I always thought of him as the giant, you see, and yet when I saw him, he was a short man. His stature was really small.

But then he opened his mouth, and when he spoke I realized that he was the giant. And I remember distinctly to this day-- and I always quote it-- what he said to the young people, and he talked to them about hope. He talked to them about excellence, about being the best.

And he said, if you can't be the pine on the top of the hill, be the scrub in the valley below, but be the best that you can be. And this is so important, I think. And he told them, all of you will not become doctors, and lawyers, and engineers, and teachers. It may fall to some of you to sweep the streets. And he said, but if you sweep the streets, I want you to sweep the streets like Beethoven wrote his music. Sweep the streets like Shakespeare wrote his poetry. Sweep the streets like Michelangelo painted his pictures.

I was mesmerized. I just sat there, and he's talking to these youngsters about hope. And I went away from there with a new feeling of, somehow, we're going to overcome this. This is going to change. And so I did, in my small way, those things that I could do to try to effectuate the change, and I finally became a principal of an elementary school, all Black. And I had a wonderful experience there, very provincial-type school, people carrying a great deal, something similar to the school that I attended when I was young.

But then they sent me to an all-white school for integration purposes, and of course, with certain apprehension and

trepidation, I went there. But we both discovered, after being placed together, that we had a lot in common, and that is a love of kids. And it became a love affair. I really enjoyed that experience for another almost two and half, three years.

And during that time I was there, I went to Houston, Texas on a convention, elementary school principals convention. And in the evening, for relaxation, I went to the Astrodome, and I was sitting there, watching a ball game when the news flashed on the marquee. Dr. King was shot. And behind me some of the local people began to clap their hands and say, we got him, we got him. And then about two minutes later they flashed up that he was dead, and they stood up and cheered.

And I got up and walked out. And of course, when I got back to my motel, feeling very down, as I guess most Americans did at that point, I began to look at the television and saw the rioting, and the fires, and the hostility, which was so diametrically opposite to what his philosophy was. And here this was happening because, as a leader, he was no longer with us.

And I began to be fearful. But I came back to my school, and I took his picture and hung it up in my office. And believe it or not, the district superintendent of the school system had word that I had this picture up and then asked me to take it down. And I tried to explain, but she would not hear it. I guess she was worried about what the reaction would be from people who might see it.

I'm a Black principal in office, and I have a picture of Dr. Martin Luther King next to my desk. Well, I took the picture down with great feelings of hostility and resentment. And that was before I went to Houston, but when I came back from Houston, it didn't hesitate. I went in, and took that picture, and put it back up on the wall. I rue the day that I capitulated early on, but at least I did come back, and I put the picture up. And I said, I don't care. Come hell or high water, it stays up.

And nobody said a word to me about removing it. People in the school were very understanding. We talked a great deal about it. There was a great communication going on among the staff and the principal.

And then in 1968, I was asked if I would take over the leadership as principal of a senior high school. It was the Benjamin Franklin High School, and it was for all boys. And it was in Center City. It was an urban high school, populated with predominantly Black and Hispanic youngsters.

These youngsters had been in the forefront of a demonstration down at the Parkway where the Board of Education is located. They had been demonstrating against what they thought was a second-rate education, and they didn't want to get the short shrift anymore. They wanted some changes, and they ended up in a violent kind of demonstration.

And it was into this kind of situation I was to go, and I remember going down there. I didn't go right away. I thought that I had a school to run where I was located, so I would go down later on. And I got a call. Leon, I want you down there right away. But I wasn't officially point principal until September. This was in June. I said, why are they sending me down so soon?

I was soon to find out. I came into the school through the back door just to see how it was, and boy, the students were all over the place. Nobody seemed to be going to class, a lot of milling around. And when I came in, someone spotted me and said, are you going to be the new principal here? And I said, that's what they tell me.

And so he called all the rest of the fellows over, says, come on over, fellas. Look, this dude is going to be our new principal. And they proceeded to ask me questions about my program, what was I going to do. And I said, well, right now I don't know. I'm just getting here. I'm trying to find out from you. Maybe together we might do some things.

And they said, let me tell you, if you don't do something, we're going to burn this place down. And I knew that this fellow was real. He wasn't joking. And so I proceeded to try to get to know what was needed in this school, and I walked around that building, and talked to so many different people, and wrote down their problems and concerns.

And one day I came to a classroom, and in that classroom there was a lady. And she was trying to talk to the young

men, who were not listening to her. They were doing everything but listening. And I stood at the door, and I began to realize that she was a survivor, and she had survived one of the worst camps. She had survived Auschwitz, and she was here on this particular day to share her experience, her pain, if you will.

And these young men were not listening. They had their own pain, you know, and I understood that, the pain of rejection, the pain of not being given the kind of recognition you deserve. I understood all of that. I had been through there, and I knew their pain. But I also knew her pain.

And so I had to say to them, hold it, fellas. Cool it. Listen. What she says is true. I was there. And so they got quiet for a while. And once she started telling her account of what happened at Auschwitz, they really listened.

And she told them how she lost her grandmother, grandfather, her parents, brothers, sisters, cousins, all those near and dear who had come into that camp. All of them had gone to the gas chambers and ended up in the ovens. And of her family, she was the only one that came out of there.

And they listened. She shared with him so much. And they asked her questions, which made me know that she had reached them. They came up, and looked at the numbers tattooed on her arm, and they thanked her. And they did something that hadn't been done in a long while. They left that room in silence.

And of course, she turned to me, and of course, tears were coming down her face. And she thanked me for my intervention and wanted to know more about my experience at Buchenwald, and I began to remember.

Is this is the first time you had talked publicly to any--

First time I hadn't told anyone that I had been at Buchenwald, not my mother, not my family, my children. No one knew that I had been there, and I had no reason to bring it back, I felt until this day, when she pushed the button. She was a catalyst, I guess. And I said I had seen it, the first time I acknowledged that I had seen it.

And then when she started talking to me, I could recount it all. She said, now, would you share that with others? And I didn't realize that we had a Holocaust counsel in the city, so she had me come down and talk to them. And they had me on a program one evening with Rabbi Schacter in Brooklyn. I remember him. He, too, was a Liberator of Buchenwald.

And the two of us set up there, and then we recounted to the public what we had seen on that day. And after that, I've been talking about it ever since. It's why I come out to places and share. I've been sharing since, I guess-- 1970 this must have been that I went to the council, and I've been all over the country, from Canada to Boston, Mass, everywhere, universities, high schools. Anyone that will listen and invites me, I'll go, and talk, and tell them because there are people out there who are saying it didn't happen, the revisionists who, for their own purposes, are trying to say, look, this was not as bad as it was.

And I find it hard to fathom their thinking, but I know it did happen. And so I don't want them to push it under the rug like they did slavery. And slavery-- I went all through school and knew nothing about that institution and its horrors until I became an adult at the graduate school, that I found out all the things about slavery that made me most aware of the horrors of that institution that pulled out 40 million souls for free labor all over the world. We had our 40 million here in this country.

And look what it did to us. Racism had just about split us so many different ways until we can't live in harmony with one another, suspicious. All of this I discovered as an adult, and I didn't get it when I was young, when I should have had it because people didn't want to deal with it. It was an ugly side of our history, and ugly things we want to push under the rug. We don't want to deal with it.

And I'm saying to people today, you must face it. You can't laundry and sanitize our history. You must take history with its beauty, and you must take it with its degradation. You've got to deal with it for us to be whole human beings and to make a difference, and this is especially true with young people. And so I go around telling my story.

And of course, I get the people saying, Leon, what are you dealing with this? This is not a Black problem. I said, hey, it's not a Black problem. It's not a white problem. It's a human problem, and we've got to face it. And as Dr. King says, injustice anywhere is a loss of justice everywhere, you see, words to that effect.

And it's true. What affects you affects me. Your pain has to be my pain, and my pain has to be your pain. And I must somehow convey that the young people that I come to. It's my commitment.

And somebody says, why are you dealing with that mess? I said, I'm sorry. I know it's been 40-something years, but that doesn't make it go away. It only makes us become more aware that we, today, have to do something to stop that which created the Final Solution, and that something is racism. Really, racism is at the root of all of this. Under that umbrella comes bigotry, and prejudice, and discrimination, unemployment.

People who are unemployable-- there are large institutions filled with those who are drug addicts and those who are criminals, all because somehow we haven't come to grips with that institution called racism. And we have to because we see the ultimate of racism, which was what I saw at Buchenwald.

And so what do we do? Do we, as educators-- and I use it in the broadest sense because we are all teachers of the young. In our way of life, do we convey to them the best that we can be, or do we give them the worst side that we have? Do we promote racism through our apathy?

When we hear and see things, we say nothing because we don't want to jeopardize that which is important to us, our investment in a job, our investment among friends. We don't want to disturb our families, so no matter what people say or do, just leave it alone. Sweep it under the rug, and somehow it'll go away.

But the skinheads are with us. The Klan is with us. They may be dressed in a Brooks Brothers suit with attache cases. They may be doctors. They may be lawyers. They may be the guy who drives the bus. But they are still with us. Some may not say anything, but somehow, those of us are aware. And when we see and hear the evil that comes out that would make us less than what we should be, then we have to dare to be that Daniel. We have to stand up and face it.

And somehow, you got to pay a price. It's not easily done. Somebody said, Leon, you come here with these pronouncements and platitudes about racism. That's tough.

I said, look, I didn't come to give you a rose garden. I'm planting one. I come here to give you the unvarnished truth. If you dared to go to your synagogue, and to your church, and to your mosque, or wherever you go, and then you learn all about your Judeo-Christian ethics, the Sermon on the Mount, or the Ten Commandments, the Torah, whatever, and you take all of these wonderful tenets, and you come back to your job, or your school, or wherever, and you tend to practice them, you want to put them into operation, hey, you become vulnerable. You can be had. You're going to get your lumps.

But there's no other way. We have to be courageous enough. We must have something deep down inside us and say, this I believe, and this is where I stand, and I will do it. And we answer that question by looking in the mirror, not at each other, but in the mirror and say, is the price too high?

I think not. I think the price is not too high. And I always tell the people-- when I close my talk to them, I always close it with the words of James Baldwin, who said, either we love one another, either we hold one another, or that sea will engulf us, and the light will go out.

I can only say this, Leon. There is a Hebrew word, chazak, which means, be strong. I hope you continue to be strong and do what you're doing.

And I'll keep the faith, whatever that is.

Thank you very much.

Plain English-- thank you very, very much.

My pleasure, gentlemen.