

Amelia Earhart (1897-1939)

While most accounts frame Amelia Earhart's legacy around her work as a pioneer of American aviation and on her mysterious disappearance, her contributions to post-suffrage women's equality also make her a historically significant figure. Whether she expressly meant to or not, Earhart broke down barriers and served as a role model for many women, not just aspiring aviators. From her first world-renowned flight across the Atlantic as a passenger, to her time spent at Purdue University as Counselor in Careers for Women, Earhart viewed her accomplishments not only as personal achievements, but as feats for women everywhere. Amelia Earhart achieved much in her short lifetime, but perhaps her greatest feat was her ability to navigate the world within gendered limitations while simultaneously defying them. She figured out how to present herself as a barrier breaker and yet remain admired by both men and women alike.

Earhart's celebrity secured her the public's admiration, which she then used to shape and mold discussions about femininity in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s. As Earhart exceeded the societal expectations and norms for women of her time, she placed herself in an optimal position to become a role model for women, young and old, and to inspire a transformation in societal attitudes. Earhart believed that every woman should have an equal opportunity to prove her competence, and that no one should receive preferential treatment based on his or her gender. This individualistic view of women's rights affords her a unique place in the history of feminism. Through her support of the Equal Rights Amendment, her encouragement of women pilots, her style and fashion sense, her career at Purdue University, and many other accomplishments, Amelia Earhart left a significant mark in the fight for women's equality.

Amelia Earhart was born at the end of the restrictive nineteenth century, and she grew up in a time when attitudes about women were slowly changing. During the 1910s, there were increasing opportunities for women who wished to remain unmarried and work outside the home. Two historical moments serve as important markers of this change: the campaign for women's suffrage and the events of the First World War. While Earhart did not participate in the suffrage campaign, her experiences during the war changed the course of her life.

After her flight across the Atlantic, Earhart's life changed immensely. She became an instant hero and role model to many women. She never returned to settlement work and instead took to touring the country, giving lectures about women in the workplace and in the field of aviation. As Earhart's fame grew, the public began to recognize her as a proud champion of women's rights.

Rosa Parks (1913-2005)

On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks boarded a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Instead of going to the back of the bus, which was designated for African Americans, she sat in the front. When the bus started to fill up with white passengers, the bus driver asked Parks to move. She refused. Her resistance set in motion one of the largest social movements in history, the "Montgomery Bus Boycott".

Rosa Louise McCauley was born on February 4th, 1913 in Tuskegee, Alabama. Growing up in the segregated South, Parks was frequently confronted with racial discrimination and violence. She became active in the Civil Rights Movement at a young age.

Parks married a local barber by the name of Raymond Parks when she was 19. He was actively fighting to end racial injustice. Together the couple worked with many social justice organizations. Eventually, Rosa was elected secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

By the time Parks boarded the bus in 1955, she was an established organizer and leader in the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama. Parks not only showed active resistance by refusing to move she also helped organize and plan the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Many have tried to diminish Parks' role in the boycott by depicting her as a seamstress who simply did not want to move because she was tired. Parks denied the claim and years later revealed her true motivation:

"People always say that I didn't give up my seat because I was tired, but that isn't true. I was not tired physically, or no more tired than I usually was at the end of a working day. I was not old, although some people have an image of me as being old then. I was forty-two. No, the only tired I was, was tired of giving in."

Parks courageous act and the subsequent Montgomery Bus Boycott led to the integration of public transportation in Montgomery. Her actions were not without consequence. She was jailed for refusing to give up her seat and lost her job for participating in the boycott.

After the boycott, Parks and her husband moved to Hampton, Virginia and later permanently settled in Detroit, Michigan. Parks work proved to be invaluable in Detroit's Civil Rights Movement. She was an active member of several organizations which worked to end inequality in the city. By 1980, after consistently giving to the movement both financially and physically Parks, now widowed, suffered from financial and health troubles. After almost being evicted from her home, local community members and churches came together to support Parks. On October 24th, 2005, at the age of 92, she died of natural causes leaving behind a rich legacy of resistance against racial discrimination and injustice.

Mother Theresa (1910-1997)

Standing at a mere five-feet while she was alive is a woman whose memory towers over the world to this day. Poor, marginalized, small in stature, and a woman, she had the makings of obscurity, but these were features that did not define her spirit or her message. Her love and compassion gained the attention of princesses and world leaders, earned her a Noble Peace Prize, and touched the hearts of everyday men and women around the world—forcing the world to reexamine their own priorities, hearts, and minds.

“Do not think that love, in order to be genuine, has to be extraordinary.”

In a world that values prosperity and ambition, Mother Teresa, a woman stripped of all earthly desire, carrying only love in her heart, challenged the status quo. From a young age, Mother Teresa felt a love for God and the poor that compelled her to become a missionary. She made the first steps to fulfilling this calling at the age of eighteen by joining the Sisters of Loreto.

“Be faithful in small things because it is in them that your strength lies.”

A year later she moved to India, became a teacher, and began her monastic journey. While on an annual retreat to live among the poor, twenty years later, she felt a “calling within a calling” to remain with the poor. With the support of the Catholic Church eventually the Missionaries of Charity was formed. Today the charity has surpassed 4,000 members with a mission to care for “the hungry, the naked, the homeless, the crippled, the blind, the lepers, all those people who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared for throughout society, people that have become a burden to the society and are shunned by everyone”.

“The world is full of good people. If you can’t find one be one.”

This woman of physical and material mediocrity shook the world through her selfless devotion to the poor, proving that it is not our successes that define or empower us, it is the potential for goodness and selflessness that exists in every human heart that has the true capacity to change the world. It is this forceful essence of love that Mother Teresa leaves behind that reminds us of the power that resides in us all. So long as we have a heart and a mind centered around love, we are empowered to make a difference in the lives of many.

“For me, Mother Teresa serves as a signpost in answering these questions. She says we frequently get so caught up in grand plans to save the world that we don’t see the little things right in front of us that we could do to help our neighbors. The result is that we end up doing nothing, pushing the grand plan into the future as it is always too intimidating to start now. She points out that when she started her order she had no ‘grand plans,’ but began by picking up one dying man off the street. If she had known in the beginning what a massive worldwide organization her order would become she fears she never would have had the gumption to start it, (Quote from Reggie Littlejohn, founder and president of “Women’s Rights Without Frontiers”)