

Pages for All Ages

A Life that Speaks

Some words and phrases to know before you read

- slavery
- segregation
- laws
- pacifist
- organizer
- “whites only”
- arrested
- boycott
- violent
- spokesperson
- practical
- spotlight
- background
- gay

Nobody is ever fair and kind all the time. But we know the difference between unfair and fair. We know the difference between cruel and kind. We know we should try to be kind and fair, even if others are acting cruelly and unfairly.

Bayard Rustin’s grandfather was born into slavery. [“Bayard” rhymes with “hired.”] The United States ended slavery in 1865, but the country kept on treating African Americans cruelly and unfairly. Sadly, when Bayard was born in 1912, it still seemed “normal” to White Americans for Black Americans to *always* “stay out,” “go away,” “sit in the back,” “wait till last.” This is called “segregation.” There were laws that said Blacks and Whites had to stay apart from each other. When he was a boy, the law said Rustin could not go places that White children could go.

During his grandfather’s life, slavery ended. During Rustin’s own life, laws for segregation ended. For bad ideas to end, people need to learn good ideas. Bayard Rustin taught thousands of people that segregation was a bad idea. He taught them that they could say “no” to unfair laws, although they might be punished for it. He taught them that people can get laws to change.

Bayard Rustin was a Quaker and a pacifist. His grandmother raised him to treat every person as a member of one human family. She raised him to only use peaceful ways to solve problems. Rustin was also an organizer. He knew that to solve problems, people had to get together. They had to work together to plan what they wanted and plan how to get it.

To end the problem of segregation, Rustin let his life speak. While he was still in high school in the 1930s, he decided to sit in the “whites only” part of the local movie theater. He did this to show that unfair laws could not control his life. The police arrested him and put him in jail. A few years later, he sat in the “whites only” part of a bus. The police beat him up and put him in jail. He went to different jails and prisons dozens of times in his life because he broke unfair laws on purpose. He always behaved peacefully when he got arrested.

In 1955, African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama, decided to end the problem of unfair rules on buses. The rules said that a Black person had to give up their seat on a bus to any White person who wanted it. After a long, tiring day at work, nobody wants to be forced to give up



their seat. So African Americans organized a bus boycott in Montgomery. They would ride no buses, and they would give no money to the bus companies, until the rules got changed. This boycott made White people in Montgomery angry. Some of them got violent. Some of them even set off bombs at African Americans' homes.

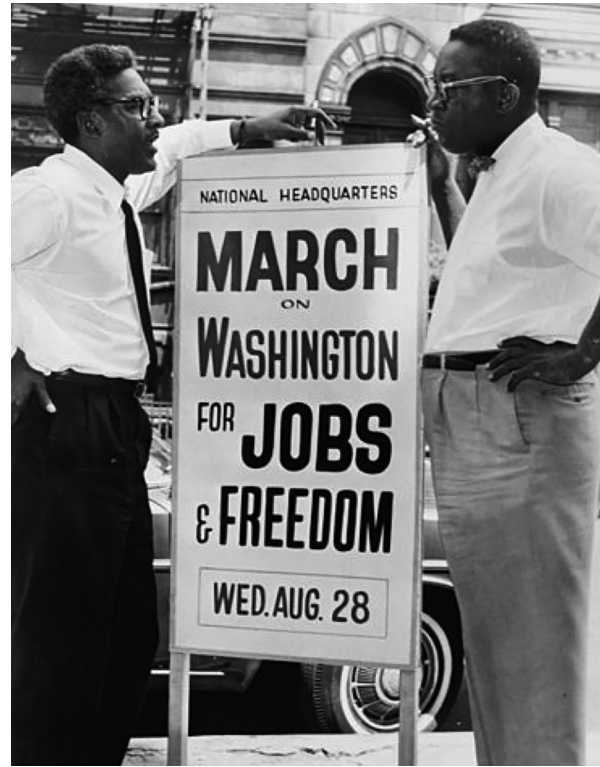
Martin Luther King Jr. had just arrived in Montgomery to be a new pastor there. King was a great thinker, a wonderful speaker, and a man of powerful faith. People in Montgomery chose him to be their spokesperson for the boycott.

Bayard Rustin was working for a pacifist organization in New York City when the Montgomery bus boycott started. Many pacifists were worried that Black people in Montgomery might become as violent as the White people there. Rustin decided to go to Montgomery to see if he could help keep the boycott peaceful.

Rustin learned that African Americans in Montgomery were collecting guns. King was not a pacifist yet. Guns were a common sight in his home. King had never learned how to organize peaceful protests. He could describe wonderful, far-off visions of a world of perfect justice, but he didn't have the practical skills that Rustin had.

Rustin and King worked together, on and off, for eight years. Rustin helped King become a pacifist. King made his most famous speech in 1963, "I have a dream," to a crowd of 250,000 people in Washington, DC – a crowd that Rustin organized to be there that day. But Rustin mainly stayed out of the spotlight. That was partly because Rustin was an organizer, and the job of an organizer is to stay in the background and take care of a million details. But Rustin also stayed in the background because he was gay.

It was still against the law in most places in 1963 to live a gay lifestyle. Rustin never kept it secret that he was gay, but he tried to keep it quiet. If it got into the news that Rustin was gay, almost nobody would work with him.



Near the end of his life, when he was in his seventies, Rustin started organizing to end laws that were unfair to gay people. All his life, Bayard Rustin showed that it's always possible to find new ways to make the world more kind and fair. ❖

- Describe a time when something happened to you or a friend that was not fair.
- What did you or your friend do about it?
- Describe something in the world today that seems unfair.
- What are people doing about it? What more can they do?

Page 16 photo of Rustin with young people before a demonstration in 1964 by Ed Ford.

Page 17 photo of Rustin (left) and Cleveland Robinson, lead organizers of the March on Washington in 1963, by Orlando Fernandez. Both photos in the Library of Congress.