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# "Mr. Rickey, I've Got Two Cheeks"

## Nathaniel Mays

### **The Body, Mind and Spirit of Jackie Robinson**

*Editor's Note: "Mr. Rickey, I've Got Two Cheeks': The Body, Mind, and Spirit of Jackie Robinson," recounts the story of Jackie Robinson, who "had to maintain his composure (spirit) while under the microscope of a society that was divided on matters of race. Somehow, this giant of a man was able to synchronize his body, mind, and spirit in such a way as to usher in a new era in baseball and society."*

Getting a quality education is costly. Anyone paying attention to what's going on in the world of education can tell you this. They will also tell you that, in the long run, the benefits of a good education far outweigh the costs. There are also those unexpected educational moments that, by one's own admission, are priceless—the kind of life-impacting experiences that remind you that there is more to life and education than the material benefits and power and prestige that some seek. Even when you think you know something, you can find yourself amazed at new information that unexpectedly lands on your lap. To my surprise, I found myself the beneficiary of one of these special experiences in life, as a result of a trip that I made to a store near my home.

About two years ago, I was in a discount store in my neighborhood. While there, I noticed a section of the store with DVDs of old television shows and movies for one dollar. Having an appreciation for history, and I suppose, a good bargain, I bought a few of the DVDs and took them home. Little did I know that it would be two years before I would get a chance to see the DVDs. Moreover, I had no clue that one of the them, "The Jackie Robinson Story" a 1950 docudrama starring Robinson who plays himself, Ruby Dee and others (DIGIVIEW Productions), would provide me with insights into a part of American history that I had only heard about. I didn't expect that watching Robinson tell his own story would cause me to reflect on what higher education, and society at large, could be today, if we dared take the selfless approach to work and life that Robinson took.

The movie starts with Jackie as a boy of about 9 years old showing up at a baseball practice for boys, all white but for him, in his hometown. The two men who were there hitting balls to the boys, to test their skills in fielding the baseball, heard this high-pitched voice call out, "Hit me one Mister!" One of the men, thinking that the boy would not be able to handle the ball, hit one to him and was surprised to see how well the boy could field the ball. Impressed with the boy's ability to field the ball, the man hit another ball to him with the same result. Unlike the other boys fielding balls, little Jackie was fielding balls barehanded. The man was so impressed with Jackie that he gave Jackie an old, beat-up, baseball glove to keep. Although the glove was not new, little Jackie ran home to

show his mother the glove with an excitement that would cause one to think that he had been given a brand new glove.

Next, the movie moves quickly through the years and focuses on Jackie's junior college athletic career. This is where the real Jackie Robinson comes into the picture. He was a handsome, clean-cut, and articulate young man. One scene shows his mother sewing the letters of his school on the back of a sweater. When he realizes that they were arranged incorrectly, Jackie, in a respectful tone, politely explains to his mother that, the way she had the letters arranged, no one would know whom he would be jumping for at the track meet that he would participate in the next day. Jackie was referring to a track meet that his older brother (Mack) had participated in, in which Mack had set the junior college long jump record. This was my second look into Jackie's spirit. He spoke with such respect and pride of his brother's accomplishments. You could feel the genuine appreciation of his brother's accomplishments.

Jackie later attends UCLA where he continued his exciting athletic career. It is clear that his real focus, as a student, is to get a job as a coach at a school somewhere. The movie shows Jackie contemplating dropping out of college, thinking that a college degree wouldn't help him, a "colored man," get a job. Even in the face of this unfortunate thought, Jackie had a very good spirit about himself. When asked by one of his white colleagues if he had gotten any answers from the high schools that he had sent letters to (applying for coaching jobs) Jackie replied, "Three. The first school didn't want me for a coach. The second school didn't want me for a coach. (Jackie laughs) The third school, they just didn't want me." In the face of his rejection, Jackie never seemed to express any negative emotions towards the social system that was keeping him from his dream job of coaching.

After a stint in the Army, Jackie played for a negro-league baseball team, where he continued to demonstrate how gifted he was athletically. It was during this time that he was being scouted by the Brooklyn Dodgers. At this point in the movie, I was introduced to the Jackie Robinson that history speaks most about, the Jackie Robinson who would break the racial divide and become the first person of color to play big-league baseball.

Interestingly, current popular history talks about his being the first person of color to play big-league baseball in a matter-of-fact way. Hindsight, of course, tells us that there was nothing inevitable or matter-of-fact about his entry onto the field of U.S. baseball at the time. That is, Jackie Robinson was offered, by Branch Rickey of the Brooklyn Dodgers, the chance to be the first "colored" baseball player in the big-leagues. He accepted that opportunity and had a great career in baseball. This one-dollar DVD provides insight into the remarkable human spirit that was behind Jackie's success.

At one point in the movie, a representative from the Dodgers approaches Jackie and informs him that Branch Rickey, President of the Dodgers, wanted to meet with him. Jackie was asked if he could get away for a day to meet Mr. Rickey and he replied that he could. Jackie was told to meet the gentleman at the train station that night but failed to show up thinking that the whole incident was nothing more than a joke. When the man

later appeared at Jackie's hotel room and questioned why he didn't show up, Jackie realized that he really was a representative from the Dodgers.

Jackie made the trip to New York. When Jackie was asked if he knew why he had been brought there, he said that he was under the impression that Brooklyn was starting a "colored" baseball team. When he learned that Brooklyn was interested in him playing for the Brooklyn organization he couldn't believe it. Branch Rickey informed Jackie that he wanted good players who could help Brooklyn win pennants. Rickey then began asking Jackie a series of questions, the answers to which would focus attention on Jackie's body, mind, and spirit. It was clear that Branch Rickey believed that Jackie had the athletic ability to do well on the baseball field. However, to be the first person of color in big-league baseball was going to require more than athletic ability, if the experiment was going to be successful.

"We're tackling something big here Jackie. If we fail, no one will try again for twenty years. But if we succeed—(a voice from another person in the room interjects 'If we succeed, Brooklyn will win a pennant')—yeah, that too. But we are dealing with rights here. The rights of any American to play baseball . . . What do you think Jackie?" Jackie responds, "Well, I can try." "Think you've got guts enough to play the game, no matter what happens? They'll shout insults at you. They'll come in spikes first. They'll throw at your head." Jackie responds, "They've been throwing at my head for a long time Mr. Rickey."

Rickey continues, "Suppose I collide with you at second base and when I get up I say you, you dirty black so and so. What do you do?" Jackie asks, "Mr. Rickey, do you want a ball player who's afraid to fight back?" Rickey responds, "I want a ball player with guts enough not to fight back! You've got to do this job with base hits, stolen bases, and fielding ground balls Jackie! Nothing else! Now, I'm playing with you in the World Series and I'm hotheaded. I want to win this game no matter what. So, I go into you spikes first. You jab the ball into to my ribs and the umpire says out. I flare! All I can see is your black face. That black face right over me. So, I hall off and punch you in the cheek. What do you do?" Jackie looks at Rickey very patiently and says, "Mr. Rickey, I've got two cheeks." Rickey looks him in the face and says "Good!"

After a series of other questions about his role with the Negro League team that he was playing for, Jackie is told that he would receive a contract to play for Brooklyn before he left that day. Rickey also informs him that he should not sign it right away. The next question that Rickey put to Jackie was "Is your mother living?" Jackie said "Yes, Sir. She's in California." Rickey encouraged Jackie to "Call her up. Ask her advice . . . And, Jackie, remember one thing, no matter what happens on the ball field, you can't fight back. That's going to be the hard part. You can't fight back."

This purposeful meeting marks the beginning of the historic integration of major-league baseball. Although it may be hard to believe, baseball as we have come to know it today would not be what it is, without Rickey's foresight and Jackie's ability to align his body, mind, and spirit to face this awesome challenge. Without this meeting, there would be no

Henry Aaron, Willie Mays, Roberto Clemente, Pedro Martinez, David Ortiz, Manny Rivera, Joe Morgan, Alex Rodriguez, Daisuke Matsuzaka, Ken Griffey, Jr., or other minority big-league players, coaches or managers today. Baseball as we know it, could have been very different.

So, why have I gone to great length to recount the story of Jackie Robinson? What's the point? The point is that to meet the challenge that life presented to him successfully, Jackie Robinson had to align his body, mind, and spirit. He had to be prepared to deal with people who would attempt to harm him physically (his body), yet not fight back. He had to listen to slurs and insults (mind) and remember not to return insult for insult. He had to maintain his composure (spirit) while under the microscope of a society that was divided on matters of race. Somehow, this giant of a man was able to synchronize his body, mind, and spirit in such a way as to usher in a new era in baseball and society.

The history of African-Americans is filled with stories of individuals who were, like Jackie, the first in their disciplines. Robinson's motivation, like many of the others, was a love for what he wanted to do (play baseball). In accepting Rickey's invitation to integrate big league baseball, Robinson also shouldered the burden of other African-American baseball players. In the spirit of those who had gone before him, and many who followed him as active participants in the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, Jackie had to practice a non-violent response to the slurs and abuse that he faced, if other African-Americans were going to be allowed to play big league baseball. It is easy to conjecture that Jackie's Christian upbringing was partly responsible for his willingness to "turn the other cheek". I don't believe it was. I think that Jackie's response to Rickey about having two cheeks was an acknowledgment of religious influence, not a religious statement. I believe that Jackie's ability not to respond, in kind, to the negativity that he faced was motivated by a sense of social responsibility, not religion. Robinson was a competitor! Under normal circumstances, defending his honor was not out of the question for Jackie. This is what makes his accomplishment even more meaningful. Jackie was able to set aside his personal, instinctive, desire to defend himself in order to give others a chance to play in the big leagues.

Beyond baseball, this \$1 DVD caused me to wonder what our society would be like today without the determination of Jackie Robinson and others like him. It also caused me to question what higher education in America would be like if people felt comfortable thinking about how their actions would impact others, and not just how they could benefit. What would higher education be like if people thought about the greater good and not just about themselves? What if teaching and learning, and not careers, money, and power were the primary focus of what we do in higher education? What if people had guts enough not to fight back?

Having worked in higher education for nearly twenty years now, I have had many opportunities to witness the negative impact that "fighting back" has on members of educational communities. There seems to be something instinctive about our desire to defend ourselves when we feel under attack. This was the gist of Jackie's question "Do

you want a ball player who is afraid to fight back?" The thought being that the player would look weak. And, as we know, nobody likes to look weak or vulnerable. Yet, we have also seen, and Rickey clearly communicated, that it takes more control not to respond negatively when one is under attack than it does power to defend one's self.

As I watched this movie over and over, I couldn't help but think about the many social encounters that take place daily on college and university campuses (student-to-student, student-to-faculty or staff, parents-to-administrators, etc.). Admittedly, there are people who make wonderfully positive contributions to higher education and who have mastered the art of selflessness. They have touched the lives of those that they come in contact with in very positive ways. I've been the beneficiary of the spirit of how some of these people have approached their work. I would even go as far as to say that I am where I am professionally because so many people have willingly given of themselves to nurture my journey through higher education.

Just as certain as I have seen the good that some contribute to higher education, in my career, I've seen many unfortunate things happen that have had a negative impact on the experiences of many people connected to higher education. I've seen minor situations spin out of control because individuals were concerned more about how they were being disrespected than about the logic of their arguments. Often, people get so entrenched in their emotions that they refuse to consider that their position on an issue could be wrong or distorted. It is also the case that some people know that their positions are wrong, yet their need to be right does not allow them to admit that they are wrong.

During my time in higher education, I've seen supervisors blame their staffs for their own shortcomings. I've seen colleagues engage in games of one-up-manship in order to find favor in the eyes of harsh supervisors. I have known brilliant, yet overly proud, members of faculty and staff who have made unfair decisions that impact students, simply because they were "rubbed" the wrong way by a student. I've dealt with highly emotional parents who have gone to great lengths to get what they want out of a university, simply because their professional status made them feel entitled. I've seen students who have disrespected their peers, faculty, and staff simply because they wanted their way. I've seen too much pain, frustration, and suffering for unnecessary reasons on college and university campuses.

Everyone says that they are working toward the same goal of a successful academic and social experience for students that will allow students to leave the institution and make positive contributions to society. Yet, in the heat of daily competition in higher education and life, our instincts cause us to want to strike back when we feel under attack. We seem to live, from day to day, on those momentary victories that fighting back provides us.

But, what if we had the strength in body, mind, and spirit to take Rickey's advice and not fight back? What if we could convince ourselves that we, like Jackie Robinson, also have two cheeks? What if . . .?

## Reference

*The Jackie Robinson Story*, [DVD], DIGIVIEW PRODUCTIONS, LLC, 2004 (original publication date: 1950)