



**CENTERING THE SACRED NARRATIVE OF OUR HISTORY:
CENTENNIAL REFLECTIONS, WALKING WITH DR. WOODSON
IN THESE TIMES**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THE MARKING OF THIS MONTH OF A century since the founding of Black History Month by Dr. Carter G. Woodson, February 7, 1926, clearly comes at a critical juncture in our history, the history of this country and indeed, the history of the world. It is a time of terrible turning in which our history is not only questioned and subject to denial, distortion and attempts at erasure, but also we, ourselves, are subjected to increased levels of surveillance, scrutiny and suppression of various kinds. And it is also a time when security of persons and whole peoples is threatened, democracy is openly mocked and manipulated, and lying is established as an official way of life. Moreover, free speech and assembly and righteous resistance are criminalized and subject to unjust penalties in court and on campus, and to unconscionable killings in the street. And there is the morally monstrous reality of genocide live-streamed, documented and denied at the same time by the genocidists themselves.

Times like these demand and deserve the best of our sensibilities, thought and practice, and these, Nana Woodson tells and teaches us, must always be rooted in a strong grasp of history, for whatever is unfolding in front of us, has its origins in the past. And we are now witnessing the resurgence and further developments of the racist and imperialist negatives and horrors of a history US society never wanted to come to terms with or even

admit. And in our moments of possible doubt, emerging despair and deciding which way forward, a review of our past offers us models and mirrors of life and struggle. This process which Dr. Woodson engaged in and urged us to do also is now what is called in Akan, *sankofa*, a reaching back and retrieving knowledge, understandings and paradigms of excellence, achievements and possibilities that inform and inspire our awesome movement through human history.

The metaphor of “walking with Dr. Woodson” is used here in remembrance of walking with my mother and father around the yard or down the road or in the fields and forest at various times, talking, sharing sights, sounds, sensibilities and thoughts, and listening to my parents discuss and teach the world I wanted to learn and experience in countless ways. Indeed, I turned to them to raise questions and receive answers on how to see and engage the world, both the social and natural world which they taught me to know and relate to in good and responsible ways. Walking with Dr. Woodson, then, is to accompany him, as with them, on a journey of listening and learning, questioning and seeking answers to the critical issues facing us, this country and the world.

When we of Us talk of our history as a people, we refer to it as a sacred narrative, because we understand ourselves and our lives as sacred, and because our righteous and relentless liberation strug-

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gle to bring a shared and inclusive good in the world is a sacred mission and moral imperative. Thus, we take the irreversible position that no other people is more sacred or holy, or chosen or elect, or worthy of respect than our own, and no history is more worthy of being taught or told or more yielding of lessons and light for us than our own.

As I read Nana Woodson, both his intellectual and practical work offer cogent evidence of a special role and responsibility of African, Black, peoples in history. He stated that he regarded “the (Black) race as a factor in world culture rather than as an element in a sequestered sphere”, that is to say, a significant force in world history rather than an isolated, secluded, quarantined element which is marginal and marginalized. Therefore, he questioned and criticized the educational system for teaching us “to admire the Hebrew, the Greek, the Latin and the Teuton and to despise the African”, to embrace the sacred and secular histories of others and to deny and dismiss our own. Nana Woodson also stressed the centrality of history to our studies, life and struggle. He taught that “only by careful study of the (African American) himself and the life he is forced to lead can we arrive at the proper procedure in this crisis”. Indeed, he emphasized studying history to understand not only the past, but also to improve the present and to develop culturally grounded and effective ways and means to build the future.

Furthermore, Nana Woodson wanted us to understand ourselves in comprehensive ways, first in terms of our seeing ourselves as part of a world historical community and people, African people. He wanted us to look beyond the ghetto vision of history which is both limited and limiting for us. In his formation with his colleagues of the Association for the Study of Negro (African American) Life and History (1915), he stated its purpose was “the study of peoples of African blood”. Also, in the first issue of the *Journal of Negro History* (1916), he said it was committed to “publishing scholarly research and documents on the history and cultures of Africa and the peoples of African descent around the world”. And it is this pan-African conception of engaging the “life and history” of African peoples with African Americans at the center of their own history that forms a central understanding of Black Studies as a whole.

An activist-scholar, he lead and participated in numerous academic and community-grounded activities to institutionalize Black history. He understood that he, his colleagues, and his people were fighting against a system of structures, policies and practices, and that they must build an alternative and counteractive network of interconnected institutions and practices of resistance. Thus, he fought not only to integrate Black history in the educational system, but also in the social lives of the people. And he and his colleagues developed scholarly journals for

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the academics, more accessible literature for the everyday person, trained teachers; started history study clubs; used the media; published scholarly and popular books and articles; involved community elders, leaders and organizations of various kinds in varied activities; and encouraged documentation and activities of remembrance, reflection and shared commitment.

In addition, Dr. Woodson emphasized the liberatory function and power of historical knowledge that anchored a comprehensive, liberational and relevant education. As an educator, he advocated education as a practice and promise of freedom, stressing that freeing the mind is key to freeing the whole of our lives. He states that “the opponents of freedom and social justice decided to work out a program which would enslave the Negroes' mind inasmuch as the freedom of body had to be conceded”. But this freedom is only “nominal freedom”, not real freedom. He calls on us to take responsibility for our own freedom, telling us, “The race

will free itself from exploiters just as soon as it decides to do so. No one else can accomplish this task for the race. It must plan and do for itself”.

HE LIKEWISE TELLS US THAT WE ARE both anchored and obligated by the achievements of our ancestors who in spite of the most savage oppression, defied the prophets of doom and “enrolled themselves among the great”. Thus, he concludes saying to us, “To you then comes the challenge of what you will do in building upon the foundation which they have laid”. And “If we do not take hold where they left off and advance further in the service of truth and justice, we are unworthy to claim descent from such a noble people”. Our task and challenge, he taught, is not to try to duplicate the greatness of our ancestors, but “to imbibe the spirit of these great men (and women) and answer the present call of duty with equal nobleness of soul”, and dare to “give humanity something new” and inclusively good.▲

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