



**GARVEY'S LETTERS FROM ATLANTA:
REBUILDING AND BECOMING THE WHIRLWIND AND STORM**

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Throughout the global African community, we gather together this month to celebrate the centennial of the founding of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) and the birthday (August 17, 1887) of its founder, our revered ancestor, the Hon. Marcus Garvey, pan-Africanist leader, teacher, builder, way-opener and promiser of the whirlwind. The legacy of lessons he has left us is the subject and substance of a lifetime in striving and struggling for what he called Africa's Redemption, i.e., Africa's freedom, well-being and flourishing.

Within his writings in *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, edited by his co-worker and wife, Amy Jacques Garvey, are two letters he wrote addressed to Africans of the world during his political imprisonment in Atlanta Prison. I focus on these two letters for the lessons they offer on oppression and resistance; on how to conduct ourselves and keep faith and focus under the worst of circumstances; and how to maintain what Molefi Asante has defined as "victorious consciousness" in the face of setbacks which can easily turn into a self-defeating sense of hopelessness and despair. Also, I have chosen the two letters to bring added attention to unjust imprisonment, mass incarceration, police violence and militarization, and all the other repressive aspects of the established order under the color and camouflage of law, including the Patriot Act, drones and endless cameras, data banks and Homeland security units.

For we are at a point in our history and the Movement at which the symbol and substance of resistance in Ferguson can be just another episodic demonstration of justifiable outrage, or that special spark that

ignites a forest fire of righteous resistance all over the country and aids in laying an essential foundation in struggle for rebuilding the Movement. And Garvey's advice in his letters to our people offers a set of views and values indispensable to this project.

In Garvey's first letter, he talks of continuing struggle even after death and promises he will return in the whirlwind and storm, saying: "Look for me in the whirlwind or the storm, look for me all around you, for with God's grace, I shall come and bring with me countless millions" of ancestors from the Diaspora and Africa "to aid you in the fight for Liberty, Freedom and Life".

Garvey speaks of our struggle against a corrupt and brutal system "gone drunk and crazy with its power", and seeking "through injustice, fraud and lies to crush the unfortunate". Our task, then, rooted in the ancient ethical teachings of our ancestors, is to defend the unfortunate, free the oppressed, occupied and captive, heal the sick, house the homeless, feed the hungry, clothe the naked and needy, and give asylum and sanctuary to the persecuted and pursued. In the words of *The Husia*, we are "to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place among those who have no voice". Here it must and should be clear to us all that we, Garvey's descendants, are the *whirlwind* and *storm* in which he will and must come, and in which the other countless ancestors will come with him to aid us in righteous and relentless struggle to free ourselves, be ourselves and build the global and continental African community and world we want and deserve to live in.

To do this and be this, Garvey asks us, as does Mary McLeod Bethune, to be heirs,

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custodians and practitioners of some essential dignity-affirming and life-enhancing values. As always, he challenges us to commit to service and sacrifice. He defines himself as “a humble servant” of his people who, with his wife Amy, gave “years of steady work and sacrifice” to the cause of African liberation. Also, Garvey calls us to continue and intensify the struggle, to “Hold fast to the Faith. Desert not the ranks, but as brave soldiers march on to victory”. Moreover, he asks and urges us to practice a unity in diversity in pursuit of shared good and shared interests as a people, to “Hold fast to the ideal of a dignified Black race” and “work together as one people”. For there is no future in fragmentation and fracture.

Finally, one is struck immediately by Garvey’s deep-rooted resolve, his audacious defiance and his steadfast faith in our people, in a word, his victorious consciousness and he asks us to be and do no less. In his first letter, he says, “I am delighted to inform you that your humble servant is as happy in suffering for you and our cause, as is possible in the circumstances”. In the second letter, he greets his “co-workers in the cause of African Redemption” saying, “It is with feeling(s) of deep love and thoughts of a great future for the (Black) race that I address you”. And he assured them that months of “being imprisoned as a punishment for advocating the cause of our real emancipation, have not left me hopeless or despondent”; but instead he sees victory and freedom coming. Then, he tells them they are not to read setback as defeat saying,

“Our enemies have seemingly triumphed for a while, but the final battle when staged will bring us complete success and satisfaction”.

The lessons here are don’t confuse the temporary for the long term and the final, nor the battle for the war and walk away from the battlefield prematurely. And remember too that others can declare our defeat, but only we, in accepting it and refusing to continue to resist, can make it a reality. For as long as we resist, we are not defeated, even if we are outwardly captured or conquered. Isn’t this the centuries-old lessons of Haiti, the decades-old lessons of Palestine and the millennia of lessons of our people and other oppressed and struggling people everywhere who would not despair, be diverted or concede defeat?

Indeed, some of us similarly did not and would not declare the Movement over at the end of the Sixties or in the middle of the Seventies because the “green power” advocates and new “negotiators” were given a new kneeling and approval-nodding space in high places. Nor did we attend the fake and well-funded funeral of the Movement officiated and advertised by the corporate and foundation elites. On the contrary, we took and continue to take the ageless advice of Garvey, Bethune, Malcolm and all our revered and honored ancestors: hold fast to the good; do not believe the lie or live the borrowed and imitation life, but free ourselves, be ourselves, love ourselves and build a life and future for ourselves worthy of the best of our history and culture.

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