



**KING AND OUR MORAL MISSION:  
TRANSFORMING OURSELVES AND THE WORLD**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**T**here is an unlimited library of lessons in the lives and teachings of our ancestors, those who, as Seba Ptahhotep says in the *Husia*, “listened to the Divine”, spoke truth, did justice, and worked tirelessly to secure the well-being of our people and the world. So it is with Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., awesome preacher, prophet and dream weaver whose martyrdom and sacrifice we commemorate this month. And so it is with Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, educator, institution-builder and enabler of the people; the Hon. Elijah Muhammad, divine messenger, molder, and reminder of our divine image and essence; Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, way-maker, movement mother, and midwife of history; Al-Hajj Min. Malcolm X, master teacher, fire prophet, bringer-of-the-uplifting word, and all the others who taught us the Good, the Right and the Possible. For they all belong to this most ancient spiritual and ethical tradition we share as an African people in all its various forms.

That is why it is so important that whenever we discuss and honor King and any of our great ones, we put them in the context of the conditions, culture and people that produced them. Having done that and been rightfully attentive to their particular message and meaning to the people from whom they came, we can then talk seriously about the universal message and meaning they have for others also.

So much of the real message and meaning of King is lost in the efforts to extract him from the people and Movement who made him possible. People easily concede the Jewishness and Gentileness of White heroes, heroines and holidays. Indeed,

the English, Irish, Israelis and other Whites all have their sacred and secular narratives and teach them to the world. But they have a tendency to explain away the Blackness or Africanness of our men and women of weight in the world, as well as the history, culture and struggle that made them. And they encourage us to do likewise. In a word, they cultivate the sense that in order to affirm the greatness of persons or their message, we must deny or play down their Blackness or Africanness.

All great men and women, messages and works have both particular and universal meaning. They speak first to the people who produced and nurtured them, and molded them into the rich resource of good and guidance they become. But, if they are truly great, they speak to the best of what it means to be that people and to be human at the same time. And other people, seeing this expansive meaning, embrace it as their own, as they have done with religions, philosophies and practices which come from particular peoples but also speak to the world.

Aware of this truth and its meaning for us, him, the Movement, and humanity, King speaks first to us, urging us to struggle to free ourselves and in the process expand the realm of freedom in the world. Throughout his Movement life, from Montgomery to Memphis, he called on us as a people to recognize and respond effectively to the world historical nature of our struggle and the moral mission which impels it. At his first mass meeting in Montgomery, he ended his speech by assuring us that if we struggle “courageously, and yet with dignity and love, when the history books are written in

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future generations, the historians will have to pause and say ‘there lived a great people—a Black people—who injected a new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.’” In fact, he said, “This is our challenge and overwhelming responsibility”. And in an essay published posthumously, he asked us to bear in mind that we as a people “bring a special spiritual and moral contribution to American life—a contribution without which America could not survive.”

Dr. King wanted us to have an expansive concept of ourselves so that we could play the role of moral and social vanguard, as we say in *Kawaida*, that history and heaven have assigned us. He tells us he recognizes the ravages of racism on our history and sense of humanity, saying “The tendency to ignore the (Black person’s) contribution to American life and to strip him of personhood is as old as the earliest history books and as contemporary as the morning paper”. And “to upset this cultural homicide” and resist the physical homicide against us, we “must rise up with an affirmation” of our own manhood and womanhood. Indeed, he says, “we must find our defense in the amazing power of unity and courage” and be confident our “salvation lies in united action” for common good.

King advocates a transforming struggle which frees and strengthens us and radically restructures society. He wants us to “massively assert our dignity and worth . . . to stand up amidst a system that still oppresses,” “recapture the revolutionary spirit and go out into a sometimes hostile world, declaring eternal hostility to poverty,

racism and militarism”. Elsewhere, he cites “racism, materialism and militarism” as the major problems of the world and urges us to pursue justice, promote peace, end war and weave a “world-wide fellowship” based on mutual respect and common good. Addressing the ongoing issues of police and vigilante violence and the interrelatedness of the two, which we continue to witness, he states that “police brutality with community support or at least indifference is a daily experience for (Black people) in all too many areas of the South” and the whole country. He urges a relentless resistance to this and all forms of injustice, exploitation and oppression. And he calls on us to seek political power thru the vote, organization and mutual alliance; and economic power thru full employment, unionization, ownership and disciplined consumer practices and to do good in the world with both.

Finally, King tells us that “however deeply (we) are caught up in the struggle at home . . . we cannot ignore the larger world house in which we are also dwellers”. Thus, the oppressed and struggling peoples of Haiti, Darfur, Congo, Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere require our concern and active solidarity in their pursuit of peace, justice and a good life. “Now let us rededicate ourselves to the long and bitter but beautiful struggle for a new world”, he says. For we must choose to continue the unfinished fight or to betray the trust of those who struggled, sacrificed and suffered before us. “The choice is ours,” he says, “and though we might prefer it otherwise, we *must* choose in this crucial moment of history”.

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