



**REMEMBERING DR. DOROTHY HEIGHT:  
A CONTINUING PROVIDENTIAL PRESENCE AMONG US**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**D**r. Dorothy Irene Height (March 24, 1912—April 20, 2010) made her transition last week from this life to the next, rose in radiance in the heavens, sits in the sacred circle of the ancestors, and remains forever a continuing providential presence among us. Her life spans and speaks eloquently to almost a century of the history and struggle of her people—98 years of goodness given and received, of faith conscientiously kept and work well-done, of hope that would not die or be discouraged, and of being president of the National Council of Negro Women for forty-one years.

In the tradition of our ancestors, let us raise and praise her names, given for the work she did, the struggle she waged, the life she lived and the awesome legacy she left us and the world. *Queen Mother* of the Black Freedom Movement, royal in her righteous efforts to liberate and uplift her people and “open wide the freedom gates.” *Molder and Mentor* of men and women, girls and boys, the great and small, the honored and unsung. *Insightful Advisor* who counseled and called to task presidents, preachers and priests of various cloths and colors, as well as leaders, followers and fellow-workers alike. *Institution-builder* who laid claim to a sacred site “to sustain upon it an active presence for freedom and justice” in the world. *Honored Teacher* of good ways to walk, work, struggle and live in the world, who taught us to ground ourselves in hope and faith, hold fast, think deep and dare victory in all we do.

Like her model, mentor and teacher before her, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, Dr. Height left us a legacy of lessons in both the way she structured and lived her life. In her

autobiography, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, she sums up her life, offering lessons and sharing this legacy with us. Rooted in the faith of her father and mother, she was committed to loving kindness, care for the vulnerable, service to the community, and struggle for the right, the good and the excellent.

She teaches us, first, other-directedness and quality relations which enrich and expand our sense of self. She says, “I am a product of the many whose lives have touched mine, from the famous, distinguished and powerful to the little known and poor.” She learned from Dr. Bethune the wonder and power of woman, the foundational role of faith, and the indispensability of organization, struggle and coalition-building. And she was inspired by Dr. Bethune’s love of learning, commitment to education and the report that Dr. Bethune was “born with her eyes wide-open” already looking, inquiring and learning from the world. She saw in Malcolm a love for his people and a teller of “hard truths in a strong voice.” She found in working at Marcus Garvey’s headquarters, that “pride in excellence was instilled every day.” And she said, “I thrived in that atmosphere.” Thus, she stresses that we come into our own, move forward and flourish in our relations with others. But, she cautions “when you are self-centered, you stand in your own way.”

Dr. Height teaches us also respect, even reverence for the worth, work and divine goodness of women, their centrality to good, justice and peace in the world, their ceaseless striving and the awesome debt we owe them. She tells us without qualms or qualification that “Next to God we are

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indebted to women; first for life itself and then for making it worth having.” She was the consummate sister-soldier, working with women to secure their rights, build and expand their capacities, maintain their families, serve their communities, live good lives and make worthy contributions to the well-being of the world.

Dr. Height teaches us too, the love of and service to our people, the urgency of working to help them realize and develop their capacity to liberate and uplift themselves. She says, we must work tirelessly to “awaken (our) people to their rights, responsibilities and opportunities . . . lift our people up and move them forward,” and always respect the demands of their dignity. Indeed, she said, in working with and assisting others, “I came to realize that the way we gave help was more important than what was given.” For respect for the rights and dignity of every person is and must be at the heart of all we do and struggle for.

She taught us also to appreciate the power of unity—unity among women, of women and men, of our people as a whole, and in coalition and alliance with people of good will in the world. She remembers Dr. Bethune turning her fingers into a fist to show the power of women together fighting against injustice. She built the Black Family Reunion to build and reinforce our families. She struggled against the increasing class gap among us, that “unnatural distance from one another” that causes us to lose “some of our life-saving resilience.” And she calls on

us, men and women, “to come together to recapture our courage, and reunite our communities and to work powerfully together to see everybody (has) a chance” to live a good and meaningful life.

She reminds us too in her teachings to honor and “remember the dead as well as the living.” She tells us “we must rekindle and keep alive the memory of our own history in people’s hearts.” Indeed, we must remember “the value our ancestors placed on faith, kinship, education and hard work,” and act accordingly. She notes too in her summing up the lessons of her life, like her mentor and model before her, Dr. Bethune, that we owe a special obligation to future generations also.

Dr. Height tells us, “the image of the Sankofa bird which flies forward while looking backward seems to me to be a particularly apt symbol of my life.” Indeed, “the past has taught me many lessons—most especially that I have a responsibility to future generations.” And that is for her and all of us—to consciously forge the foundation for a good future and to teach young people the lessons and legacy of the past, encourage them in deep thought about “the issues and situations affecting their lives and to share what they learn with each other so that they can continue to build a world better than the one they inherited.” And this final message to all of us—young, middle-age and elder: “know yourself; set goals worthy of the person you are; hold fast; give yourself a start and keep going” regardless.

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