This last weekend found Tiamoyo and me in St. Louis giving a pre-Kwanzaa lecture, sponsored by the New African Paradigm Study Group; meeting with deeply-involved young activists of the Organization for Black Struggle and also committed older activists of the New African Paradigm Study Group and of the Better Family Life Cultural and Educational Center; and of necessity, going to Ferguson and standing and paying homage at the site of sacrifice, memory and honor of Michael Brown, another son of Africa, savagely sacrificed on the altar of police violence. Like other Black men and women previously killed by police violence, his killing was officially camouflaged as justifiable homicide under the cover and color of law, and socially sanctioned by a society unable to condemn, criticize or even question itself in any seriously moral or meaningful way. And this is especially true in terms of its White supremacist and racist treatment of peoples of color: Africans, Native Americans, Latinos and Asians. We are told that even to talk about systemic and racist oppression is divisive; to demand reparations for genocide and our Holocaust is unrealistic; and to seek simple justice is a matter requiring our patience, their sympathy and a general realistic recognition that things must work their way through the flawed system and we must accept the verdicts and results regardless.

Our morally compelling response is, of necessity, righteous and relentless resistance, an inclusive ongoing struggle in the streets, board rooms, schools, universities, workplaces, prisons, police departments, religious institutions, courts, legislative bodies, and every other site of racial oppression in its various forms. For as Paul Robeson reminded us “the battlefront is everywhere. There is no sheltered rear”. Such a comprehensive and committed struggle requires an aware, organized and consciously engaged people and a capable leadership worthy of the people who choose and make them.

Thus, as we consider how to sustain and expand our righteous and relentless struggle against police violence and general systemic violence and oppression and rebuild the Movement, the issue of leadership is of paramount importance. Now, the problem of leadership, like the loss of love and faith, is complex and ongoing and has produced various distorted forms and failures in every community. Its various unworthy forms include leadership as domination, mystification, manipulation, drafted celebrity posturing, soft-shoe proxy performances for outside sources and image management thru public relations. The rightful criticism of these forms have not always been precise or insightful and most fit within general declarations of pathology concerning everything Black.

However, real African American leaders come to the ground of struggle and the table of negotiation not with lack of credentials or self-effacing hat-grabbing, groveling and grins. Rather they come as self-conscious carriers of a venerable tradition of a people honored the world over as a moral and social vanguard and a model to lift up and emulate in the righteous and relentless struggle for freedom, justice and good in the world. The need, then, is to reject the distorted forms of leadership often literally laid at our door from outside sources or internally generated thru flaws which originate in oppression. Our task is to dialog with African culture—continental and diasporan—and recover and reconstruct our best ideas and practices and apply them in developing the discipline of leadership, and in rebuilding the Movement.

If we’ve learned anything from the leaders we admire and praise, we know that leadership in an African sense is, above all, a
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