



**HOMAGE TO FANNIE LOU HAMER:
WOMANIST, WARRIOR AND WAY-OPENER**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THIS IS A PROFOUNDLY RESPECTFUL remembering and raising up, an offering of word and water in tambiko, sacred offering, to a most honored ancestor. Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer (October 6, 1917 - March 14, 1977) is one of those awesome ancestors about whom it is said: They were so tall when they stood up, they were the height of mountains and when they lay down, they were the length of rivers. And so we raise our hands and bow our heads in homage to this wonder of an African woman, this womanist, warrior and way-opener, in this month of her coming-into-being to bring a great good in the world. And let us pour libation, practicing the *morality of remembrance* she taught us, saying, "There are two things we all should care about—never to forget where we came from and always praise the bridges that carried us over." And so, we build lasting monuments for her in stone and metal, but always in the persistent way we lift up her legacy of righteous and relentless struggle and rightfully embrace it as our own. And we do this in the most meaningful way by living the legacy and lessons of life and struggle which she left us.

She was indeed a womanist in the fullest sense of the word, deeply committed to the spiritual and ethical teachings and practices of her people, culture and faith which affirm and defend the dignity, rights, equality and indispensability of women in all things of importance in the world. She was a warrior woman, a freedom fighter, who even wounded, would not abandon the battlefield until the war was won. And she was a way-opener who prayed for a way and then opened it in practice, the practice of hard work and heroic struggle. Thus, she prayed, "O Lord, open a way for us. Please make a way for us . . . , where I can stand up and speak for my race and speak for my hungry children." And then she stood up and stepped forward to speak

truth to power and to speak truth to the people, and to serve the people, pursue justice, and uphold right everywhere.

Deeply spiritual, she strove daily to lift up what she called "this little light of mine," and worked tirelessly to drive away the long night of the evil, injustice and social savagery which surrounded and oppressed her people. At an early age, she made a vow to her mother saying, "When I get my chance, Mama, I'm sure going to do something to right this wrong." Later, she would reaffirm this commitment and call on us to embrace it also, telling us, "We must bring right and justice where there is wrong and injustice." And speaking especially to her sisters in community, she reiterated the call saying, "We have a job as Black women—to support whatever is right and to bring justice where we've had so much injustice."

For her, struggle was a way of life and living, a way to serve the people and open a way to freedom, justice and an expanded sense of our humanity. Indeed, she said "You've got to fight. Every step of the way you've got to fight." When asked why she did not just leave Mississippi and the murderous madness it represented, she replied: "Why should I leave . . . I got problems (here). I want to change Mississippi. You don't run away from problems. You just face them," i.e., confront and resolve them.

Mrs. Hamer clearly took a womanist position on the indispensability of partnership between Black women and men in life, love and struggle. She anticipated the growing rift between many Black men and women which began in the 70s. And she was deeply concerned about the damage it would do, not only to the struggle, but also to Black women and men themselves as well as to the Black family. Therefore, speaking to a group of Black middle class women, she urged them

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not to separate themselves from each other, Black men or the struggle. For she said, “Whether you have a Ph.D., dd or no d, we’re in this bag together.” And the need is “not to fight to liberate ourselves from the men—this is another trick to get us fighting among ourselves—but to work together with Black men. And then we will have a better chance to act as human beings and to be treated as human beings in our sick society.” Reaffirming this position, she stated “I’m not fighting to liberate myself from the Black man . . . I got a husband . . . that I don’t want to be liberated from. But we are here to work side by side with this Black man in trying to bring liberation to all people.”

A way-opener for her people, she spoke of how she felt responsible for the lives and self-conception of so many, especially our children. She said, “I’m not actually living for myself. If I left (from Mississippi and the battlefield), there’d be so many children who’d have no way of knowing that life doesn’t have to be a tragedy because they’re Black.”

Moreover, she offered criticism of the Vietnam War that retains its relevance for the announced wars waged in Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya and the numerous proxy and unannounced wars in Haiti, Palestine and elsewhere. First, she criticized the racist hypocrites who talked about war as a way of “helping to have free elections in Vietnam and we can’t even vote here at home.” She said, “It’s wrong to fight (in such a war). I don’t just say this for the Black man. I just don’t

think anybody with any decency should go to a racist war like that,” especially when they don’t know what’s really going on and the toll it takes in lives and resources better spent at home and elsewhere.

Strengthened by a faith that would never fail, she went forth fearless from the beginning. She said she first thought that maybe she should be afraid given the savagery she had seen and the brutality she knew awaited her and others in their quest for freedom. But then she thought “What’s the point in being scared . . . the only thing they can do is kill me, and it seems like they had been trying to do that a little bit at a time ever since I could remember.”

Since the summer of ’62 when she first stood up to answer the call of SNCC workers to register and work to involve the masses of her people, she had stood steadfast and fearless. Even when she was beaten into bad health for the rest of her life and suffered from a damaged liver and diminished sight, she would not sit down. She, indeed, gave her life so that we could live freer and fuller ones.

“**O**NE DAY I KNOW THE STRUGGLE WILL (bring) change,” she said. “There’s got to be change not only for Mississippi (and) for the people of the U.S., but (also for) people all over the world.” And we, Black people, Native Americans, Latinos, Asians and Whites, she said, must struggle together to achieve it and bring a new world, a new history, and a new way of being human into being.▲

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