



**KING AND THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FREEDOM:  
SELF-RESPECT, RESISTANCE AND RESILIENCE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

In this month of his martyrdom when we and the world turn to talk about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (January 15, 1929—April 4, 1968) in honorific and praiseworthy ways, we, as a people, have a special responsibility to be in the forefront of defining and uplifting essential elements of his legacy and fundamental lessons of his life. This is so, not only because he is a cherished member of our community, but also because the way he conceived his mission, crafted his message, built his base and focused his fight for freedom, are all rooted in the history, culture and compelling struggle of our people.

From his emergence in Montgomery to his martyrdom in Memphis, Dr. King calls on us to recognize and embrace the critical role history and our social situation have thrust on us. And this is to wage a liberation struggle which will not only free us, but also free America from its unworthy self, move it beyond its empty self-congratulatory creeds and claims, and transform it into a true realm of freedom, justice and equality for everyone. Indeed, at Montgomery he told our people in his inaugural address at the dawn of the Black Freedom Movement that we should so struggle that years afterwards witnesses to history would be compelled to say, “there lived a . . . great people, a Black people,...who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and civilization.”

He clearly challenges us to recognize and appreciate both the particular and universal character of our struggle, not only to free ourselves, but also to expand the realm of freedom in the world. Thus, Dr. King does not deny or play down the

identity of his community and its critical historical role. In this, he contrasts with those who continually try to lift him out of his community and assign him to a peopleless position, as if Blackness is limited and limiting and thus needs to be left out, toned down and disassociated from people and things great.

Dr. King also had no illusions about the role of racism in our lives and society. In spite of Pres. Obama’s ever-accommodating style and diplomatic denial of the endemic character of American racism, Dr. King tells us that “racism...is as native to our soil as pine trees, sagebrush and buffalo grass.” Thus, he would have anticipated the continuing unguarded surfacing, even in high places, of racialized and racist comments on Pres. Obama’s color, language, former “racial status” as servant and worthiness to be president, regardless of cherished post-racial fantasies in the midst of a still unfinished fight. Moreover, he knew we couldn’t wish, dream or even elect racism away, but must work and struggle to eradicate both racial and economic injustice in their national and international dimensions thru “a radical restructuring of society”.

Furthermore, King, like our other great leaders of the 60’s, would be opposed to purely privatized notions of prosperity, success, security and freedom and would opt and struggle for the common good. Thus, he was concerned that Black people forge an attitude toward freedom and struggle that makes them ever-ready and relentless in pursuit of these common-good goals. He suggests that this attitude, this moral and mental disposition represents a *psychology*

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*of freedom*, rooted in self-respect, resistance and resilience.

In waging righteous struggle, he says, “first we must massively assert our dignity and worth,...stand up amid a system that still oppresses us and develop an unassailable and majestic sense of values.” And “we must no longer be ashamed of being Black” or confused about our identity. King would clearly find the current movies we make of self-mutilation and shameless self-indictment as signs of psychological enslavement on our part. And he notes that “as long as the mind is enslaved, the body can never be free.” But King also criticizes the dominant society for creating such a criminal context in the commission of “cultural homicide”, i.e., denying Blacks due recognition and rights, stripping them of their sense of personhood and peoplehood, and perpetuating in them self-rejection and a “false sense of inferiority”. Thus, King urges a self-freeing, an audacious self-affirmation of manhood, womanhood and peoplehood, and of our dignity and our status as offspring of the Divine.

With a mind free from illusions about race and reality, what is and ought to be, Dr. King tells us we must make a sober and balanced assessment of our position, needs and prospects. He concedes that, “We can feel a legitimate pride” in our achievements through struggle, i.e., favorable judicial decisions, legislation and elections, etc. But he says, “in spite of . . . significant progress, the problem is far from solved.” The fact is that “the plant of freedom has grown only a bud, and not yet a flower”, regardless of current self-comforting conversations to the contrary. Given this, there is no remedy but

resistance, no strategy more important than struggle. And this struggle, King constantly states, must be in every area and on every level and emerge from a sustained “divine dissatisfaction” with the established order of things, a righteous discontent and distaste for unfreedom and injustice.

Our struggle, King tells us, requires a unity, a kind of “dangerous unselfishness” that makes us ever concerned about each other and collectively active in defense and development of our interests. He asserts, “Unity is the great need of the hour”, and “We must find our defense in the amazing power of unity and courage...” and be assured our “salvation lies in united action.”

King also calls on us to be resilient and continuously resistant, to remember that the Holocaust of enslavement imposed on us “the most humiliating and oppressive conditions. And yet, out of a bottomless vitality, (we) continued to grow and develop”. He reassures us that “if the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition we face now surely will fail”.

Finally, King tells us this resilience must be anchored in “an audacious faith in the future”. Interestingly, Dr. King finds in Frantz Fanon’s call for a new history of humankind a worthy hope and faith in our and others’ capacity to create a new world and humanity, but he wants to ensure it is done without violence. Indeed, elsewhere, he expresses the wish and prayer that “God grant that we will be participants in this newness and this magnificent development” which “will bring about a new day of justice, brotherhood (sisterhood) and peace” in the world.

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