



**REMEMBERING FANNIE LOU HAMER:
LEADER WITH THE SHINING LIGHT**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

She was a leader with a shining light lifted high and unwavering in the harsh winds of history, reminding us there is no real substitute for the struggle for good in the world, and no ethical or honorable way around resistance to evil and that each and every one of us has a divine-given light within us and that we must lift up this light and let it shine everywhere we are and go. Indeed, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer (October 6, 1917-1977) was a lifter up of the light within, a shining light that showed the path to a special space and way of being in the world called freedom with dignity and justice that embraces all.

It is she who taught us steadfastness in struggle for the good, saying that even if we don't win today or tomorrow, we must let the oppressor know "we're on our way", that we'll keep on coming and "we won't give up the fight" for what is good and needed in the world. And it is she who taught us to reaffirm and reinforce our respect for and commitment to the masses, to believe in their capacity to transform themselves and the world.

Indeed, the hub and hinge on which her life's work and lessons turn is a profound belief in and commitment to the people, the everyday people whose suffering, hope and struggle she shared. In speaking of Rev. Jesse Jackson's rise and need for defense against racist attacks, she says, "Power is the people. As long as Jesse got the people, he got power and cannot be destroyed". Mao Zedong had raised the call "power to the people". But Mrs. Hamer wanted us to also know that "power is the people", themselves, that it is within them, and to have the people with and for you is to have a power which is indispensable for liberation,

development and defense. Moreover, Mrs. Hamer, and other Movement leaders, also knew that the people must be politically educated, mobilized, organized and built into a self-conscious social force, keenly aware of its aims and committed to hard and relentless struggle to achieve them.

For she observes that in the course of the struggle, "we learned that even though we had the law and righteousness on our side that the White man is not going to give up his power to us. We have to build our own power". Thus, "the question for Black people is not 'when is the White man going to give us our rights. . .or. . .a good education for our children, or. . .jobs?'". Indeed, she says, "if the (oppressor) gives us anything, just remember, when he gets ready, he will take it right back". Therefore, "we have to take (power) for ourselves".

Now, to take power for ourselves is to seize and occupy critical social space in society, especially in the areas of economics, politics and culture. The critical question, then, is not about what our oppressor will do, but about when and how we will set aside illusions, reinvest our hopes in the concrete consequences of our own efforts and increase the struggle to bring into being the good world we all want and deserve to live in.

Another lesson from the life and teachings of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer is our relatedness and responsibility to and for each other. Explaining why she cannot leave Mississippi for an easier, faraway and forgetful life, she says, "You see it's important for me to stay here, because I'm not actually living for myself. If I left here, there'd be so many children who'd have no way of knowing that life doesn't have to be

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a tragedy because they're Black". Here, she wants us to have a more meaningful and expansive sense of ourselves than vulgar and debased forms of individualism allow us. We are to see our interrelatedness as persons and a people, and the mutual obligations which ground and grow from this and know a life well-lived can never be just for oneself.

Mrs. Hamer also wants us to recognize and respect the identity, dignity and ethical imperative attached to being Black, and not to see it as a tragedy, but as we say in *Kawaida*, as a unique and equally valuable way of being human in the world, worthy of the highest respect. Even before going to Africa and being spiritually uplifted and reaffirmed, she believed in herself and her people. She reports that even as a young girl, her parents taught her to "be proud you're Black and respect yourself".

There is also in Mrs. Hamer's thought the concept of a communal mission for Black people, reminiscent of the writings and lectures of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, Min. Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King. It is this sense that our social position and spiritual and ethical grounding impose on us, a vanguard role in the struggle to transform society and in the process, transform ourselves. Thus, she poses the interrelated character of our struggle for liberation with that of others, saying, "I

work for the liberation of all people, because when I'm liberating myself, I'm liberating other people". And this is so because in the racial hierarchy of society, Africans are at the bottom and thus any movement upward, doors opened or barriers torn down by them benefits all. Thus, our task, she tells and teaches us, is "to right the wrong and bring justice where there's injustice". But again this requires faith in the right and in ourselves; our firm belief that "there must be a way to change this" established and oppressive order of things; and that we have within ourselves the capacity to change it.

A deeply religious person, Mrs. Hamer taught a faith rooted in good works in and for the world. She said, "We serve God by serving our fellow man", especially the poor, the suffering and oppressed. She knew that the real witness for the faith was, above all, about doing good in the world, and that even the singing of her signature song, "This Little Light of Mine", must itself be a light lifted up—lifted up to raise the spirit, reinforce the will and strengthen the commitment to righteous struggle. For as she knew and told us in her various and unwavering voices, it is this lifted-up light and righteous struggle that will make clear and open the way to a new world—one defined by peace with justice for all and freedom with a flourishing yet-to-be-imagined and made real.

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