



**“STEPPING INTO THE WORLD:
GRASPING FOR THE GOOD FOR ALL”**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THIS IS A REPEATED AND SLIGHTLY modified message in pride, praise and honor of this year’s graduating Black students and the Black graduation ceremony itself. It’s not just the culturally specific music or the rhythmic movements the graduating students make as they march or dance down the aisle and their parents rise up in outrageous joy, and cry, clap and stand poised in defiant and dignity-affirming Blackness. And it’s not just the warm and liquid happiness that washes over the room like a repeatedly rising and receding wave that lifts us up, gently lets us down in blessed relief and yet reminds us of all it took and takes to bring so many, if not most, of us to this moment. Nor is it just the rightful recognition and respect given to those who stayed steadfast, overcame obstacles and opposition, hardship and hurricane, and who are now proudly stepping into the world to grasp the promised good for themselves and all of us, carrying the heavy hopes of their families and people with them. It is all this and much more, often half-hidden in the history that brought these Black graduation ceremonies and celebrations into being and give them their special and enduring meaning.

Over the years I’ve given Black commencement addresses at several universities—including UCLA, USC, CSU-Long Beach, CSU-Dominguez Hills and the University of Durban, South Africa. And it is always a source of immense and expansive joy to see the future unfolding in the students’ faces, to hear the celebratory singing, ceaseless murmuring and the proud and shameless shouting as family members from overseas, cross-country and around the corner bear witness in various ways to the wonder of their young people’s graduation. For it is often in spite of so many things, but still because of a fierce determination and dedication to go on regardless, do it and get it done.

The Black graduation ceremony evolved as a self-conscious marking, a righteous remembrance and a special honoring. It is first an outgrowth and respectful recognition of our history of struggle to clear free and dignity-affirming space for ourselves in the university and the country. The graduating students at Bethune-Cookman University who rose up in resistance reaffirmed both this tradition and the importance of this space. For they rejected the imposition of a speaker who would violate this space with racial irrationality, ignorance and insensitivity masquerading as a graduation message. And they honored our tradition of struggle and the founder of the university, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, who gave her life to our struggle.

Also, the Black graduation evolved as an act of self-determination to celebrate ourselves in the context of community, a context of closeness, shared history and experience, shared orientation and a shared sense of the future. Moreover, it serves as a celebration of our distinctiveness and diversity, as the campus-wide graduation is a celebration on common ground. And we do not have to sacrifice ourselves to find and share common ground with others.

The Black graduation is also designed to provide families with a more intimate and effective space for rightful recognition and respect for their loving investment in the life and education of their children. And it is a reminder to the graduating students to respect the history and struggles that brought them and us here, to keep the ancestral faith and forge a future worthy of the families and people who produced and nurtured them, lifted them up into sunlight and made them soar. Thus, I always remind them in my address what our foremother, Fannie Lou Hamer, taught us: our moral obligation to always remember where

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we came from and praise the bridges that carried us over.

I challenge them saying: “This is a message from the ancestors written on temple tablets, papyrus paper, and pyramid walls and in the ancient Egyptian sacred text, the *Husia*. It is also from those who wrote on calabash paper and imprinted it in the minds of the masters of memory in the Yoruba sacred text, *Odu Ifa*. And it is passed down over the centuries appearing in the dreams, hopes and teachings of your mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers.

It is also found and flowers in the hearts and minds of the other members of your families, your friends and neighbors who know and treasure you, the teachers who valued, taught and mentored you, the staff who caringly aided you, and your fellow students who worked with and will soon follow you in this beautiful path onward and upward.

And it says: sons and daughters of the sacred land, Africa, you wonders of women and miracles of men. You descendants of the fathers and mothers of humanity and human civilization. You offspring of the elders of humanity, who stood up first, spoke the first human truth and taught the world what was good and beautiful from the beginning. We charge you to step on out boldly into the world. *Hambani kahle emhlabeni*. Go well in the world. *Kaeni vizuri duniani*. Stay well in the world. Go forth and flourish in *Maat*, love and peace in the world. We have set you on the right course, worked, struggled and sacrificed to bring you to this moment of awesome meaning.

You are the hope we have held tight to, the sacred seeds we’ve sown that now have burst into divine and wondrous flowers and you will soon assume your rightful role in the world. And ‘when it is your turn to take re-

sponsibility for the world, do good for the world;’ speak truth, do justice, cherish freedom, treasure peace and always bring good in the world.

Be kind, caring and generous. Shine forth brilliantly in the day and be no less luminous in the dark, constantly bringing forth the best of what it means to be African and human in the world. Never let your hopes and dreams wither in the harsh heat and hassle of the world. Water them, nurture them and bring them to harvest with all your heart and mind and the magic you make thru hard work that weaves good and happiness in the world.

It is written in our sacred texts that humans are divinely chosen to bring good in the world and that we are morally obligated to heal, repair and transform the world, making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it. Be then a bringer of good in the world. Be like water that refreshes, revives and sustains the world. Be like the sun ever rising to bring light, warm and life to the world. Take the knowledge you’ve gained and the love you have been given and share it. Be equal to the faith we have in you. Be honored by the trust we place in you. Be strong in the struggle for good in the world we pass on to you. And above all, remember this: in all you do, reaffirm your dignity, remember your divinity, do good everywhere and walk divinely in the world.”

And as you step into the world, we also charge and challenge you in the tradition of our ancestors: to continue the struggle, keep the faith, hold the line, seek and speak truth, do and demand justice, be constantly concerned with the well-being of the world and all in it, and rebuild the overarching Movement that prefigures and makes possible and brings into being the good world we all want and deserve to live in.