



**THE MEANING AND MEASURE OF MALCOLM:
REMEMBRANCE AND RIGHTFUL READING**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

The life and legacy of Min. Malcolm X, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz, weighs heavy in the scales of African and human history, measuring as a mountain's weight against the leaf-light and less-than-notable lives of his would-be detractors. Malcolm is a multidimensional Imhotepian man, offering models and messages of rich and timeless value. He is a model master teacher and student, a model organizer and critical thinker, a model revolutionary, and a model of Black manhood in the most moral, mental, and cooperatively practiced ways. Moreover, he is rightly conceived of and honored as a soldier/servant of the people and a moral teacher. Thus, his measure and meaning lies in his written and oral teachings, as well as his living-practice texts which provide us numerous models and messages of infinite and enduring value of which only a few can be identified and discussed here.

Malcolm comes into consciousness and active commitment at a fundamental time of turning for our people, this country and indeed the world. This is that awesome decade of the 60s in which liberation struggles reached around and engulfed the world. Malcolm, reading the signs of the times, says "We are living in a world where great changes are taking place." Moreover, "our present generation is witnessing the end of colonialism, Europeanism, Westernism or whiteness . . . the end of white supremacy."

In other words, he tells and teaches us, "we are living in an era of revolution, and the revolt of the (African American) is part of the rebellion against oppression and colonialism which has characterized this era." And though this process is still unfolding with bumps, bad faith, betrayals,

diversions and setbacks, the struggles continue.

Mary McLeod Bethune taught us that "the measure of our progress as a race is in precise relation to the depth of faith in our people held by our leaders." Therefore, she says "we must never forget their sufferings and their sacrifices, for they were the foundations of the progress of our people." Such is the status and contribution, and the remembrance, respect and rightful reading of Malcolm. For Malcolm begins his project and practice with love of and faith in his people. He will not confuse individual ascension or personal success or respect with justice, respect and success for the people. He says, "No matter how much respect, no matter how much recognition whites show towards me, as far as I'm concerned, as long as it's not shown to every one of our people...it doesn't exist for me."

The measure and meaning of Malcolm is rooted first and foremost, then, in his conception of and commitment to his people, to Africans at home and abroad, here, in the larger diaspora and on the continent. He wants them to learn their history, question their religion for its relevance to lived life, and to view and value themselves as possessors of dignity and divinity, worthy of ultimate respect and having within themselves the capacity and courage to examine and alter their lives in productive, progressive and promising ways.

It is important to note that in his commitment to Third World alliance and struggle, and to the human project of freedom and flourishing, he argues that within our concern for the world, one must always and rightly start with one's own people and develop from that a world-

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encompassing conception of one's obligations and practice. "I can state in all sincerity that I wish nothing but freedom, justice, equality, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all people," he writes in the *Egyptian Gazette*. "However, the first law of nature is self-preservation; so my first concern is the oppressed group of people to which I belong, the 22 million Afro-Americans..."

Malcolm is concerned that we understand ourselves and our humanity in expansive ways, not only as part of the rising, rebellious and revolutionary tide of history, but also as bearers of dignity and divinity worthy of the highest respect and equal and inalienable rights, and to fight fiercely and uncompromisingly for them. "We are fighting for the right to live as free human beings," he states. "We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given rights as a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary."

Malcolm, as a moral teacher also taught us also to think deeply and to think in self-determined ways as an ethical obligation. He tells an audience of African American college students, "one of the first things I think young people nowadays should learn is how to see for yourself, listen for yourself and think for yourself." Ever mindful of the awesome burden of history placed on each generation and the critical juncture which they stood, he continues saying, "this generation, especially of our people, has a burden, more so than any other time in history." Thus, he concludes

reemphasizing that "the most important thing that we can do is think for ourselves." Indeed, like Frantz Fanon and Sekou Toure, he knew that the decolonized mind precedes and makes possible political decolonization, even if the process continues after liberation.

Finally, Malcolm stresses the cultural return to Africa and a pan-Africanism that reflects cultural and political consciousness and active commitment. This also meant reaffirming our humanity by embracing our Africanity, waging, he says, a cultural revolution to "recapture our heritage and identity, if we are ever to liberate ourselves." Indeed, "this cultural revolution will be a journey to rediscover ourselves" in all our excellence, achievement and possibilities. And it will mean returning to the source, Africa, "mentally, culturally, spiritually, philosophically and psychologically." Malcolm's call was for Africans to "wake up, clean up and stand up" and when he was asked "wake up to what", he answered "wake up...to their humanity, to their worth and to their heritage," that equally valid and valuable way of being African and human in and for ourselves and the world.

For, again, we must free the heart and mind and imagine and create new ways of being African and human in the world. In sum, then, he offers us a model and message of *jihad*, that righteous internal and external struggle, reflected in his own self-sacrificing life which has become a sacred text and testimony of our capacity and obligation to constantly struggle to transform, repair and remake the world in the process of transforming, repairing and remaking ourselves in the most laudable and liberational ways.

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