



**RECLAIMING OURSELVES AND OUR RADICAL ROOTS:  
ENGAGING FREEDOM AS NEVER A FINAL FACT**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**O**UR PEOPLE CAME INTO BEING IN THE midst of righteous and relentless liberating struggle, and there is a radical history to know and honor here. In this struggle, we remolded and remade ourselves through a triple resistance of *opposition, affirmation and aspiration*. We *opposed* our enslavement at every site possible through cultural resistance, day-to-day resistance, abolitionism, emigrationism and armed struggle. We *affirmed* our humanity in the most inhumane context, practicing as best we could, our own unique, and equally valid and valuable way of being human in the world, being African, being Black. And we *aspired* in thought and practice *to reclaim our freedom and ourselves*, and our own distinct and dignity-affirming sense of ourselves. And although the enslavers outlawed our learning, our reading and writing, we found ways to achieve the knowledge and in less than a century out of the Holocaust of enslavement, we created a world status literature second to none in its creativity and special message and meaning to us and the world. And we became a new nation, African Americans, new Africans, as Haji Malcolm taught, “a nation within a nation,” a distinct people within a multicultural country. And what we brought to the U.S. was vibrant, vital and transformative in spite of the callous and cold-blooded genocidal campaigns against us, physically and culturally.

We put forth a radical refusal to be defeated, dispirited or diverted from this sacred struggle. Moreover, we turned the enslaving religion the oppressor taught into a liberating spirituality and ethics of liberation. We transformed our groans and grief, our faith, hope, happiness and aspirations into

songs and dances of reaffirmation, resilience and resistance. And we refashioned mute matter into an art and literature that spoke of love, life, work and struggle and of a creativity, sensitivity, soulfulness and beauty born of African memories of freedom, lived and living experiences and aspirations of reclaiming ourselves, our freedom and our future.

It was an earnest and constantly endangered struggle to be ourselves and free ourselves from the brutish, soul bruising and anti-life system in which we were oppressed, objectified and degraded. Thus, we had no illusions about the perverse conception of humanity and human life of that/this system with its insatiable and warped will to dominate, dehumanize and claim divine sanction for the various forms of savagery conjured up and imposed on us and other vulnerable peoples. In the midst of the Holocaust of enslavement and during the savagery of segregation, our vision of a just and good society was not to simply assume the identity, ideals and pathologically oppressive practices of our oppressor against the devalued and vulnerable. It was about breaking chains, repairing and rebuilding lives, radical social change and reclaiming freedom and justice as natural rights and needful responsibilities of every human being.

We cannot and do not need to deny the presence of a varied range of political thought and practice among us in the midst of our struggle for liberation. But at the core of concern and commitment of our Black Liberation Movement was a shared aspiration and ongoing struggle of reclaiming our freedom as a people. And this freedom was to be achieved not by a mythical and manipulated “melting pot” ideal and illusion which asked

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us to lose ourselves in the acidic witches-and-warlocks brew of assimilation in hopes of gaining a new identity and respect as an anonymous American ethnic person or people. Rather it was a commitment to be ourselves in self-defining, self-determining and dignity-affirming ways without punishment, penalty or oppression. And it was to free ourselves so we could be ourselves, knowing full well we couldn't free ourselves if we wouldn't be ourselves; and we couldn't fully be ourselves unless and until we fully free ourselves. And so, we strove and struggled to push this place called America beyond its history of unfreedom, injustice and oppression.

Yet in spite of the impressive heaviness of this history, we are, especially now, vulnerable to losing our way, settling for less than who we are and what we deserve, submitting to the seductive and suppressive power of the dominant society and shamelessly forgetting and forsaking the lessons of life, work and struggle taught by our ancestors and elders, the way openers, the keepers of the faith, the all-seasons servants and soldiers for a new society and world. Moreover, we might have lapses of memory about who we are in this confusion coded context of misinformation, disinformation and lying as a way of life. And thus, we might not have an accurate and rightfully informed conception of ourselves and might adopt narrow notions of our identity and ethical obligations as African people; instead of self-consciously embracing our ancient African moral imperative to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place especially among the voiceless, vulnerable, devalued and oppressed. Also, we might see ourselves as having no relationship to the suffering, oppression and resistance of the people of Palestine or other places, or even the peoples of Haiti

and Sudan or Congo, and other Africans. Afterall, as Haji Malcolm explains, if you are not vigilant and rightfully resistant, media propaganda can make you see your own people as strangers, your friends and allies as enemies, and your enemies as allies and friends.

Indeed, we might see ourselves through the logic and language of the dominant society simply as autonomous individuals with rightful concern only for ourselves and those we choose for various small and self-interested reasons. And thus, we forget or determine it is no longer tenable or reasonable to remember Nana Anna Julia Cooper's teaching that we must and do "take our stand on the solidarity of humanity, the oneness of life and the unnaturalness and injustice of all favoritisms" of any and all kinds. Or we might fly the tattered flag of a mindless and mimicking patriotism of a racist, ranting, untutored and untethered Trump or a Biden, complicit and cooperative in Israel's genocide against the Palestinian people, constantly adjusting his redline of claimed concern as the killing fields in Palestine expand each day with the dead, dismembered, and starved and starving bodies of innocent and unarmed children, women and men, grievously unable to defend themselves.

Nana Martin Luther King warned us against the gross immorality of the betrayal of silence and complicity in the face of an unjust war against the vulnerable and devalued, and its waste of lives and resources better used for human good. And let's remember too Nana Fannie Lou Hamer's teaching that freedom requires that we "fight every step of the way." For there is no easy walk or way to freedom. Indeed, it is born, midwived and brought into being in the womb of hard work, service, sacrifice and ceaseless struggle.

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Thus, let us remember in this pivotal point in history to recommit ourselves to struggle not only to achieve every measure of freedom and justice possible in our time, but also to teach and demonstrate the quest and commitment to constantly expand the realm of good and possibilities in society and the world. I think here of the ancient Egyptian Kawaida Maatian moral obligation to constantly extend the existent good and to repair, renew and remake the world and ourselves, and the ancient Yoruba Ifa moral imperative to constantly bring and increase good in the world.

**A**ND I LINK THIS ETHICAL UNDERSTANDING to Nana A. Philip Randolph's beautiful teaching about the righteous and

relentless everlasting struggle for freedom and justice. He says, "Freedom is never granted; it is won. Justice is never given; it is extracted. Freedom and justice must be struggled for by the oppressed of all lands and races, and the struggle must be continuous. *For freedom is never a final fact*, but a constant process of higher and higher levels of human social, economic, political and religious relationships." Indeed, it is about constantly reconsidering the question of being human in the world, reimagining a whole new world and future and building them in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways, ways worthy of the name and history of being African and human in the world.▲

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