



**BECOMING OUR BLACK SELVES AGAIN:  
RIGHTEOUSLY BEING AND FREEING OURSELVES**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**I**T WAS ONCE HOW WE UNDERSTOOD AND asserted ourselves as a people, even when we thought it was a matter of communal modesty and morality not to claim it in a self-righteous, arrogant and unseemingly way. Indeed, even when we did not use the exact words, i.e., *moral and social vanguard*, this was clearly our self-understanding. Thus, it weighed heavily in our consciousness and conduct, in the way we conceived and carried out our work, waged our struggle and envisioned the new world we wanted to bring into being. Even now there are those among us who still firmly hold to this social and ethical ideal and practice in spite of media portrayals, popular conceptions and academic alternative interpretations to the contrary.

Moreover, there are also still those in this country and around the world who continue to share this understanding of us and who claim their rights and wage their struggles using us and our struggle as a moral and instructive reference and resource for what they advocate and seek. But sadly, so much of our spirit and sense of specialness has been lost among too many of us and in its place have come all too prevalent self-diminishing values and deficient conceptions of life and struggle and of who we are and what we should be about as persons and a people.

Even in the earliest days of the country, we understood ourselves as chosen by history and heaven to bring, increase and sustain good in the world. And our ethical conceptions as a people, and the savage forms of oppression we suffered compelled us to understand and pursue liberation as a spiritual necessity, an ethical imperative and a life-and-death cultural and social struggle. Liberation, then, was a matter of choosing life and struggle over the cultural, social and physical death our oppressor had chosen for us. This meant embracing Henry Highland Garnett's battle cry "Let our motto be

resistance, resistance, resistance", righteously resisting our oppressor and oppression on every level, personally and collectively. It meant refusing to let our oppressor be our teacher or give us a god or conception of good in his own wickedly White image and cold-blooded interests.

It also meant holding on to our humanity in the most brutally inhuman forms of oppression; and maintaining our internal creative capacity to carve out of the hard and horrendous rock of an unfree reality spaces of freedom, meaning, beauty and hope in spite of the circumstances which militated against it. And it clearly meant our creating a *culture of struggle*, righteous, relentless and sacrifice-demanding struggle. Indeed, we took seriously Harriet Tubman's affirmation and instruction concerning the life-and-death nature of our struggle when she said, "We must go free or die, and freedom is not bought with dust". In a word, the struggle for freedom is compelling and costly, but it must be waged and it must be won. And thus, we also listened well to and accepted Frederick Douglass' reaffirmation of Tubman's position when he said, "If there is no struggle there is no progress". And "(People) may not get all they pay for in this world, but they most certainly pay for all they get". Thus, "If we ever get free from the oppression and wrongs heaped upon us, we must pay for their removal" thru hard work, sacrifice and righteous and relentless struggle.

Certainly, we must see we have been losing ground for some time now, not in the pathological ways portrayed by our enemies and oppressors and their hirelings, handmaidens and self-enslaving volunteers of the most perverse and contemptible kind. Nor is it simply the losing of ground in terms of roll-backs of social gains, increasing inequalities of wealth and power and the many problems which threaten and diminish our lives and life-

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chances as persons and a people. It is something additional, something more essential and self-defining in an expansive way that we seem to be losing among too many of us, letting slip from our hands and minds or allowing to slowly erode until it has become more memory than a lived or even longed-for reality.

First of all, it is an increasing loss of our sense of the rightness and value of our reaffirming our specific identity and interests as a Black and African people; and our right and responsibility to be ourselves and free ourselves, to speak our own special cultural truth and make our own unique contribution to the forward movement and upward thrust of human history. This in turn leads to an increasing loss of our conception of ourselves as the moral and social vanguard that Dr. King called a liberating and spiritualizing force for ourselves and the country; that Min. Malcolm defined as part and parcel of the revolutionary rising tide of human history and that Dr. Bethune assigned the awesome and urgent task of remaking the world, using the standards of justice, mutual respect and human fellowship.

Accompanying these increasing losses is the expanding loss of the will to engage in righteous struggle in strong manly and womanly ways; to be rightfully angered at evil and injustice and moved to act meaningfully against it; to be deeply sensitive to the suffering of others and compelled to seek to relieve and end it; and to be self-consciously actively and continuously concerned with improving the quality, conditions and promise of life in our community; and to always honor the ancient African ethical imperative “to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place among those who have no voice”, the vulnerable, the poor and unpowerful.

But, of course, all is not lost nor is it ever, as long as there remains among us those who are culturally rooted, socially conscious and deeply engaged in struggle; those who understand us best as persons and a people, as *injured physicians*, conscious, capable and committed to healing and reconstructing ourselves in the process and practice of repairing and remaking the world. It is important to note that none of this said here is to deny or diminish the real struggles being waged and the righteous and transformative work being done by Black persons and organizations all over this country. It is rather a call for many more to stand up and step forward, to come boldly to the sites of battle and not backdown, turn around or find reasons to surrender our souls and accept less than victory. Indeed, it is an urgent call to keep the faith, hold the line and constantly expand the struggle.

**T**HE WAY FORWARD APPEARS AT FIRST TO take us backward; for it is a return to ourselves, the best of our ideas, values and practices and using the lessons, spirit, models and memory from these to become our Black selves again; free ourselves and righteously be ourselves in *liberated* and *liberating* ways. This is the meaning of Min. Malcolm’s assertion that “we must recapture our heritage and our identity, if we are to ever liberate ourselves from the bonds of White supremacy”. Indeed, he said, “Armed with the knowledge of our past, we can with confidence chart a course for our future”. And it will and must be a future forged in struggle, and self-consciously committed to human freedom, racial and social justice, world peace and ultimately the well-being and flourishing of the world and all in it.

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