



**LIVING THE LEGACY OF FANNIE LOU HAMER:  
SHARING AND SHAPING OURSELVES IN STRUGGLE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**T**HERE IS NO GREATER HONOR OR HIGHER praise we can offer our ancestors than to try as best we can to live the legacy of good they have left us. Indeed, they are for each and all of us models and mirrors, examples of our best ideas and practices and essential means by which we measure and assess ourselves and ask and determine where we are and how we stand. Indeed, this relationship with our ancestors as guiding lights reminds us of the prayerful request for guidance and support from the ancestors found in the *Husia* in the Book of Coming Forth by Day which says, “Ancestors, give me your hands. For I am this divine one who came into being through you.” Surely, they have brought us into being and we need their guiding light lifted high above the horizon, so that we can anchor and orient ourselves and continue on the upward and onward paths they have opened up for us.

In this the month of October Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, (October 6, 1917), revered freedom fighter and human rights activist, wife and companion in struggle of Perry “Pap” Hamer and daughter of James Lee and Lou Ella Townsend unavoidably emerges as a compelling model and clear mirror for us as we strive and struggle ever upward and onward to bring, increase and sustain good in the world. And her life and teachings are a legacy worthy of the most careful consideration and emulation. So, again and always, we raise and reflect on the life she lived, the work she did, and the righteous struggle she waged for African and human good and the well-being of the world. And we learn that we must share and shape ourselves in the process and practice of struggle. Thus, we who are conscious and committed again raise our hands in rightful homage to this wonder of an African woman, this womanist, warrior and way opener, in this month of her coming-into-being to bring a great and enduring good in the world.

If we are to live the legacy of lessons she has left us, let us in the spirit of remembering and honoring her and all our ancestors begin with her teaching about memory, *the obligation to remember*. She teaches us that, “There are two things we all should care about - never to forget where we came

from and always praise the bridges that carried us over.” This raises five interrelated lessons of remembrance, identity and place, achievement, gratitude and obligation. In Kawaida, we usually sum up these lessons under the category of the *morality of remembrance*, the ethical and intellectual obligation to remember. But I want to further engage this teaching by discussing other aspects of it.

When Mrs. Hamer tells us we should not forget, she is stressing the need to remember, for remembering is key to what it means to be human, aware and responsible. She says to us we should not forget where we came from. This is an issue of identity and place, for our identity is tied to where we come from, geographically, socially and culturally. When people ask you “where you from,” they are trying to identify you. Our coming from Africa and Mississippi, Texas, Louisiana, Georgia or Detroit contributes to how we understand and assert ourselves in the world as Mrs. Hamer discovered in Africa. Also, coming from below and rising upwards is another way to identify ourselves, especially as an oppressed people, struggling constantly upward and onward to free and be ourselves.

Here, Mrs. Hamer seems also to be saying that if you have risen up, do not deny it or diminish its importance, but count your blessings, give thanks and keep going upward and onward. But also, it suggests we should not forget those still struggling to move upward and onward. Still, we must appreciate our achievements and build on them. Sometimes the oppressor and naysayers can make us doubt and deny our achievements in our personal and collective work and struggle. But we must affirm ourselves, value our victories and find meaning and beauty in our lives and work. As always, our oppressor cannot be our teacher. We must reach deep inside ourselves and bring forth each day the best what it means to be us, African and human in the world.

Mrs. Hamer also asks us to “always praise the bridges that carried us over.” This is the call for gratitude and the honor that goes with it. We must always be grateful for the good given us, the good we achieve and the good shared with us. So, we

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praise the Most High, the ancestors and all the living who bought us into being, nurtured us, supported and sustained us and taught us dignity-affirming, life-enhancing and world-preserving ways to walk, work, struggle, love and live in the world. And here we realize we are obligated to return the good given, to share with others the good received and open ways for others as has been done for us. It is an ethical obligation to our ancestors, those living and those yet to come.

Mrs. Hamer also left the living legacy of freeing ourselves and being ourselves by *walking off the plantation*. She says in 1962, "Nobody knew I existed . . . and I didn't know them either. Then one day the thirty-first of August, I walked off the plantation." This speaks of her and our freeing ourselves from physical and psychological sites that imprison and oppress us. It means freeing ourselves from the social death and status of being artificial absentees from our own history and returning to our own history and culture in good, creative and beautiful ways.

Also, she left us the legacy of *critical questioning of America*, she urged us to question America to relieve it of its self-congratulatory illusions; it claims to be free, brave and equal; its lying and hypocrisy; and its denial of our human rights and rightful quest "to live as decent human beings." And she wants us to question ourselves and what America might have made us in contradiction to our best values and the choice we have for liberation. For even before Kawaiida coined the contention, she knew "We are America by habit and African by choice." And thus, we must think deeply, choose rightly and act freely each day.

As a womanist concerned with the liberation of our people as a comprehensive, collective and inseparable project, Mrs. Hamer left us the legacy of the *indispensability of a principled and equal partnership, between Black women and men in life, love, work, and struggle*. She tells a group of Black women, the need is "not to fight to liberate ourselves from the men . . . but to walk together with Black men." Indeed, she stated, "I'm not fighting to liberate myself from the Black man. I got a husband I don't want to be liberated from. But we are here to work side by side with this Black man in trying to bring liberation to all people."

**F**INALLY, MRS. HAMER ALSO LEAVES US THE legacy of *righteous keeper of the faith*, who believed in a divinely assigned mission to empower the people, support the poor and vulnerable, heal the sick and suffering, free the captive, and struggle for social and racial justice everywhere. "We serve God by serving our fellow man (and woman)," she taught, especially the poor, vulnerable, oppressed and suffering. Her faith taught her to believe in the eventual triumph of change for the good. And she says, "One day I know the struggle will bring change," not only for Mississippi and the U.S., but for the whole world. Thus, she asks us not to get weary, waylaid or become vulnerable to compromise in the struggle. For "Too many have given their lives to end this evil." And it is a continuing this righteous and relentless struggle for a great and ever-expanding good in the world that we rightfully remember where we came from and praise through transformative practice the sturdy, steadfast and awesome bridges that have carried and continue to carry us over. ▲

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