



**REBUILDING A CULTURE OF STRUGGLE:  
BREAKING CHAINS INSTEAD OF HUGGING THEM**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 06-03-10, p. A7*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

To refresh our memories of ourselves at our best, to recommit ourselves to principles and practices that demand and draw from us the excellent, uplifting and enduring, and to rebuild our Liberation Movement and go forth to repair and renew ourselves and the world, we must reaffirm and reconstruct our culture as a *culture of struggle*. By a culture of struggle, I mean a culture founded and formed in struggle by a people who understand and embrace struggle as a normal and necessary way of life. That is to say, they see and approach it as an indispensable way forward and upward, as a rightfully required way to break social and psychological chains, cross wrongfully restrictive boundaries, realize themselves fully, and bring good in the world.

It is a culture that understands and asserts with Frederick Douglass that “if there is no struggle there is no progress” and it’s a contradiction to “profess to favor freedom” and “deprecate agitation.” It is a culture that recovers and reaffirms Fannie Lou Hamer’s contention that “we must bring right and justice where there is wrong and injustice.” And that “Every step of the way you’ve got to fight.” And it is a culture that embraces and acts on A. Phillip Randolph’s assertion that “Freedom is never granted; it is won. Justice is never given; it is extracted.”

Here struggle is defined as righteous, rightful and ongoing striving on every level and in every area of life, as the *Odu Ifa* says, “to bring good in the world and not let any good be lost.” This is obviously and intentionally a moral conception of struggle rooted in the Maatian ethical teachings of our ancestors who perceived struggle as morally compelling, necessary and natural for human good and the well-being of the world.

It is *morally compelling*, because our ethical tradition obligates us to struggle against wrong, evil and injustice everywhere

and bring good in the world. It is *necessary*, for without struggle, as noted above; there can be no real or righteous progress. And it is *natural*, because it is in the interest of human freedom and human life. For we are born in freedom and it is unnatural to be unfree and likewise, it is natural to struggle to recover freedom when and where it is denied, and to struggle to expand it in dignity-affirming and life-enhancing ways.

Thus, a culture of struggle has as a central contention that every constraint on human freedom and flourishing is immoral, unjust and unnatural as Anna Julia Cooper taught us. And this is so whether it is outright or disguised oppression or discrimination, imposed poverty, institutionalized ignorance and miseducation, monopolies of wealth and power or structured dependence of any person or people on another. A culture of struggle, then, of necessity holds with Malcolm X and Martin King that we have the right and responsibility to struggle against evil and injustice everywhere. King urges non-violent active resistance and Malcolm, leaving our options open, sanctions “freedom by any means necessary,” i.e., depending upon how the oppressor responds to our rightful resistance.

Even as a culture of struggle praises the people for its righteous and heroic resistance to oppression, it also condemns collaboration in one’s own oppression as immoral, cowardly and ultimately self-destructive. Frederick Douglass, speaking of the abolition of enslavement in the West Indies and the resistance of enslaved Africans, praised the enslaved Africans for seizing the initiative in their own struggle, and refusing to collaborate in their own oppression. He says that in their rebellions, “they bore themselves well. They did not hug their chains, but according to their opportunities, swelled the general protest against oppression.”

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And in their righteous resistance, the enslaved Africans demonstrated to the enslavers that enslavement was wrong and came with considerable costs and consequences. Thus, Douglass says that abolitionists “showed that slavery was wrong”, but the enslaved Africans in resistance “showed it was dangerous as well as wrong.” Indeed, the oppressor has no right to security in the practice of oppression and no claim to peace in the practice of injustice.

Malcolm reminded us that there still exists contemporary versions of those “house negroes” who hugged their chains in the Holocaust of enslavement and those Africans working in the fields who hated their chains and dared to break them. “House” and “field” are symbolic types of collaborators and combatants, of the submissive and subversive, and either of them may, in real life, be in any social or physical location, and in any group or class. But a “house” position, i.e., a “higher class,” often cultivates a mentality of indictment, distance and disregard for the people, acute denial of discrimination and oppression, pathetic identification with the oppressor or established order, and satisfying oneself with a materially-comfortable and socially-cushioned place in oppression. And this is clearly “chain-hugging” in a most self-degrading and self-mutilating way. But to be righteously and irreversibly committed to liberation and justice and to oppose unfreedom and injustice everywhere and in every way possible is to be a breaker of chains and a way-opener for our people and humanity as a whole.

A culture of struggle grounds itself also in the fundamental understanding that we are our own liberators, that a people that cannot save itself is lost forever and that those who would be free must strike the first, the final and decisive blow. It is again A. Phillip Randolph, who reaffirmed that “salvation for any race, nation or class must come from within” and that at the heart of this social salvation is the disciplined and deep-rooted struggle for and achievement of a social justice which combines political freedom and the economic foundation to exercise and enjoy it.

Finally, a culture of struggle is unavoidably rooted in the hearts and minds of a people who are grounded in their own culture, clear-minded about their identity and the responsibility of caring for each other, undeterred by danger and obstacles of any kind, and consciously committed to an enlightened and liberating collective vision and vocation which informs and undergirds what Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune calls “our ceaseless striving and struggle” as a people. Indeed, as Frantz Fanon says, “the living expression of the nation is the consciousness-in-movement of the whole people. It is the coherent and enlightened practice of men and women.” This means boldly accepting the awesome responsibility and demands of our history and humanity. And this ethical obligation, as a world-encompassing conception, begins with ourselves and leads inevitably to a constant concern and ongoing active commitment to the well-being and good of the world.

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