



SEEKING VICTORY OVER TWO VIRUSES: COVID-19 AND THE PATHOLOGY OF OPPRESSION

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

IN THESE TROUBLED, TROUBLING, TRAGIC AND trying times, more than ever, we must not only be a people *in itself* but also a people *for itself*. That is to say, a people who are not only different and distinct, but also self-consciously and actively so. In other words, they must be rightfully appreciative of themselves, deeply rooted in their own culture, and constantly and confidently drawing unlimited lessons from the culture they have created, the history they have made and the experiences, thought and practice of their daily lives. And as a people for itself, they must also be uncompromisingly committed to being themselves and freeing themselves from all constraints on their lives and their rights to a life of self-determination, security, justice, equal and equitable treatment, access and opportunity; well-being; and to realize their potential to flourish and come into the fullness of themselves.

I raise the centrality of our understanding and asserting ourselves as an ancient, ongoing and engaged community, if we are to weather the winter we are witnessing and the battering storms and burdensome stress still to come. Here is a time for us to deepen and expand our consciousness of ourselves and our practice as a people, as a community that truly cares about each other, that cares for each other, that can and do depend on each other, and that works and struggles with and for each other to heal ourselves, sustain ourselves, and define, defend and advance ourselves and our interests in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways.

Indeed, as our long, labored and liberation-oriented history of freedom and unfreedom, of Holocaust, oppression and resistance, awesome suffering and self-healing and achievement against all odds has taught us, the ultimate solution to all our problems lies in the self-conscious ways we live our lives, do our work and wage our struggles for good in the world. And at the heart of all we endure, dare, do and overcome must be our rightful attentiveness to the quality of our relations with each other. Again, it is an urgent question and critical matter of how we love our people and each other and what we actually and continuously do for

each other. And it is also about what we do with each other, not only to weather this winter of disease, disablement and death brought by the current coronavirus 19, but also to overcome the persistent pathology of oppression of U.S. society.

Thus, we must constantly keep in mind that we seek victory over two viruses, the biological virus of Covid-19 and the social virus of the pathology of oppression that preceded and increased our vulnerability to Covid-19. I use virus here to specifically mean an infectious agent which is harmful and deadly to humans, animals and plants and thus a problem for the world. It is synonymous with a pathogen, an infective agent that generates disease. And I speak here of a disease as both a biological and social condition of pathology. Indeed, those two realities interact and help explain the greater vulnerabilities to Covid-19 that Black people and other peoples of color evidence and become ill from and die from in greater numbers.

So, as we struggle to keep safe and well, to save our lives and heal ourselves in the onslaught of Covid-19, let us be mindful that we must continue and intensify the struggle simultaneously and on many fronts against the pathology of oppression which generates social and biological disease. This dual struggle recalls the “Double V”, Double Victory, campaign launched in 1942 by African Americans during WWII. They rightly sensed and asserted the fight was not only against the barbarism of Nazism and fascism abroad, but also against the savagery of White supremacy and racism at home. It was phrased as a fight for democracy at home and abroad, but it was most definitively a struggle for freedom. For there are, as our people recognized, various deviant and degraded conceptions and practices of democracy.

In the Black Freedom Movement of the 60’s, this question of the problematic character of an exclusive democracy was engaged also when America was again talking about “making the world safe for democracy”. Again, our people challenged the hypocrisy and vacuity of the concept and campaign. They argued that the campaign to make the world safe for democracy must be preceded by the campaign *to make democracy safe for the world*. For its exclusive racist character made it

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not of the people, for the people or by the people. Rather, as Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer noted, it was “of some people, for some people and by some people”, i.e., White people. It is in this context of denouncing a diseased and disease-producing democracy that she diagnosed America as a “sick society”, needing the life-saving remedy of radical reconstruction. And Min. Malcolm X concurred, defining America as a *herrenvolk* master race democracy which was in fact a brutal “disguised hypocrisy” that made us not beneficiaries, but rather “victims of democracy”.

There is now, as was then, in the midst of the Second War of the White worlds, an abundance of talk about us all being vulnerable and in this together. But the very conversation calls to mind, not only the lack of past and present practice of equal treatment to prove it, but also the actual differences in life conditions and capacities to deal with and survive the virus. Again, the pathology of oppression generates underlying and pre-existing conditions of race and class that aid in determining the disease’s incidence, prevalence, mortality rates, and burdens of dealing with the disease among us and others similar.

So, we may all be vulnerable to the disease, but we are vulnerable in different ways and to different degrees. These include our chronic health conditions and the pathogenic social conditions which help generate and sustain them; the greater risk of exposure from the conditions of our lives and work, i.e., toxic environments, front-line work, unemployment, homelessness, incarceration; lack of adequate access to quality health care, insurance and health facilities; financial limitations; food insufficiency and insecurity; the history of racism which undermined the ability and willingness to seek needed care; and lack of culturally competent healthcare, outreach, interaction and exchange with Black people. In summary, these and other structural inequalities, inequities and injustices euphemized as simply “disparities” or differences

hide the racist history and current devastation of the pathology of oppression.

Such boilerplate conversation also suggests that we are the same, all Americans with equal worth and rights to a good, meaningful and flourishing life in this country. But we are not the same and nor are the conditions or capacities of our lives in America which are shaped and misshaped by the pathology of oppression. For our access to and possession of wealth, power and status are different and therefore determine our life, health and death and our unequal suffering in daily life. So, we are not the same as our oppressor. And if we don’t distinguish ourselves from our oppressor - intentional or incidental, we will continue to confuse our interests with theirs, see no need to resist our oppression, and simply seek a comfortable and accommodating place in oppression. There are so many lessons to draw from the libraries of our lives, work and struggle in this country and the world. But none is more central than this: that we are our own liberators; that the oppressor is responsible for our oppression, but we are responsible for our liberation; and part of our responsibility is to hold our oppressor responsible for their oppression of us, through righteous and relentless struggle.

IN THIS REGARD, WE KNOW THAT EVERY RIGHT denied must be gained, regained and sustained through ceaseless striving and struggle. And thus again, all the variant and viral forms of the pathology of oppression imposed on us can only be mitigated, contained and eventually eliminated in righteous and relentless resistance. In other words, only in the transformative fire of reaffirmation of ourselves and our rights and radical opposition to the pathology of oppression in all its diseased expressions can we heal and free ourselves and participate fully and meaningfully in the radical reconstruction of society in clearly human-respecting and world-preserving ways. ▲

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*, *The Message and Meaning of Kwanzaa: Bringing Good Into the World* and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*,
www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org; www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org;
www.MaulanaKarenga.org.