

Concerning History, Heritage and Struggle: Reaffirming and Renewing Our Vanguard Role

by

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If we are to know ourselves rightly, honor our history, radically improve our present and forge a future worthy of the names African and human, then we must reaffirm and renew our moral and social vanguard role, and wage righteous and relentless resistance to evil and injustice everywhere. And put forth in plan and practice a new history and hope for our people and humankind. In the months of February and March, which we of Us have designated as Black History Month I (General Focus) and Black History Month II (Women Focus), our people have set aside time and space to celebrate ourselves “in history” and “as history.” For we are producers and products of this sacred narrative, and the subject and center of this awesome record and struggle, the most ancient of human histories.

In this sacred narrative which we tell and teach as African history, we speak poetry and prophecy, talking of things to come and of things that are holy, that heal and lead to the health and wholeness of humanity and the well-being of the world. And we seek and speak truth, do and demand justice, and struggle constantly to have our lives unfold and flourish as a worthy and seamless whole. For in this sacred narrative, it is written in the Odu Ifa that “humans are divinely chosen to bring good into the world,” and that we are to lift up the light that lasts and illuminates the way, and that expands the boundaries and increases the possibilities of being and daring good in the world.

Indeed, we assert in Kawaida philosophy, that we are chosen by both heaven and history to bring, increase and sustain good in the world. To say we are chosen by heaven and history to bring good in the world means we are to understand and assert ourselves as a moral and social vanguard. Indeed, we have been and must remain that moral and social vanguard whose work and struggle, moral vision and vocabulary have become a model and mirror of human struggle for liberation in the world. This is the meaning and central message of Dr. Martin Luther King's teaching that we must always struggle and work for ourselves, history and humanity in such a way that "when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say 'there lived a great people—a Black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.' This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility." And this mission is reaffirmed and reinforced earlier in the insightful and enduring teachings of Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune who taught us that we are a people whose interests and tasks are world-encompassing. Thus, she says, "Our task is to remake the world. It is nothing less than this."

U.S. society is by all standards standing at the edge of a cliff of crisis. It is an impending crisis defined by an election that revealed how narrow and racialized are the notions so many White Americans have of humanity, human rights and human needs. It also revealed how unaware and/or unwilling they are to accept the inseparable link of peace, justice and reciprocal respect, and the problems their aggressive hatred and hostility toward others different pose for this country and the world. Furthermore, it is defined by a declining economy, needing more than the diversions and disasters of apartheid walls, religious and racial bans, and the brazen bravado of an unlettered pitch man; self-entrapment in immoral and unwinnable wars; diminished status and respect even among allies; millions homeless and without health care; deep-rooted race, class and gender injustice and inequities; and a "leadership" lacking intellectual insight, moral grounding and the right to govern by any rational and ethical standard. It is in times like these that we as a people have in the past emerged to pose a fundamental challenge and hope for society, a way out of the moral and social morass in which it has sunk itself.

This emergence of national moral leadership from among us in times of crisis is a recurrent historical process reminiscent of the time of the Black Freedom Movement and Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin King, Ella Baker, et al, leaders who understood and practiced leadership as a moral vocation in service of the people, the good society and the just world. They did not put their hopes in an elected man, but in a chosen, built and sustained Movement.

The point is that these and other leaders of the Movement challenged the country to change, move from oppression to freedom, repent its racist savagery and redeem and remake itself.

And it was the Black Freedom Movement as a whole, youth, middle-age adults and elders that gave people a sense of hope and possibility. It also allowed White youth and older adults an opportunity to participate in something more uplifting than lording over and oppressing others and pretending a superiority, specious in its claim, irrational in its assumptions and grossly immoral in its conception and conduct.

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Thus, it has been our role as a moral and social vanguard in this country to challenge U.S. society, not only to live up to its best founding ideas and documents as did Dr. King, but also to go beyond them as Min. Malcolm urged, and imagine a new way of being human in the world. Indeed, thru our struggles and the struggles of others, we have expanded the realm of freedom and changed society in ways the “founding fathers” could neither imagine nor accept. So, we must not lose sight of our larger role, regardless of the tragic and catastrophic turn of events. For we have experienced and overcome worst times, attacks and terrors than these.

Moreover, in this constant search to redeem and renew itself without substantive change, society stands ever ready to repeat its reality-show of glitz, glamour and shameless bragging and aggressive bravado without making steps to radically reconstruct itself, regardless of who is president or pretending to be. Thus, elections show society will support campaigns which offer self-congratulatory images and ideas of itself while providing little more than promises as progress, symbols as substance, and selected Black presence in high places as evidence of social change and achievement. And it will offer shared hope for a new society as grounds for coming together as “Americans” instead of the shared wealth, power, status that simple decency and justice require. But we must set aside all illusions offered, keep the faith, hold the line, and continue the struggle.

Likewise, society will, if we let it, even redefine and rename Black History Month—Black Heritage Month—in order to freeze-frame it and reduce it to memory-dulling-and-deforming ceremonies, and celebratory gestures and references ripped from their context and stripped of their essential and emboldening lessons of life and struggle. For to talk of heritage is to speak of things handed down and to be essentially honored with ceremony and respectful silence. But to talk of history is not only to remember in rightful respect, but also to learn its lessons, absorb its spirit of possibility, emulate its models of human excellence, achievement and struggle, and practice the morality of remembrance in real and righteous ways. For history is both memory and movement and if we remember rightly, we build a wall of resistance against self-forgetfulness and open a way forward toward achieving an expansive human good and a longed-sought well-being of the world.