



## BLACK PEOPLE: STORM RIDING, WHIRLWIND BLOOMING, SPECIALIZING IN THE WHOLLY IMPOSSIBLE

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

ONCE AGAIN, THE EDGES OF THE YEARS have met and merged, and another new year has come. And we find ourselves and the world in the midst of winter in the worst of ways. COVID-19, a pandemic of worldwide proportions and devastating impact, has swept across the world, wreaking havoc on the health, lives, and livelihood of millions, showing no mercy and no signs of an early exit. Understandably, there is great anxiety, uncertainty, loneliness, and loss of vital closeness as the disease demands physical distancing. For it imposes disruption on the familiar and foundational rhythms and realities of our lives that cultivate, reaffirm, and sustain our relational closeness. And then, there is an insanely self-focused pretending president who lacks the humanity and morality to address or even mention the grave issue and rightful concern of the hundreds of thousands dead and the millions hospitalized and under homecare as a result of this devastating disease.

As usual, we who are racistly considered least and are oppressed most, have again suffered in greater degrees and in more numerous ways. But we must not despair and must reach deep within ourselves, draw on our inner strength, rely even more on each other, and dare to struggle to save and heal ourselves and alter and end the conditions of our illness and oppression. For we are confronted with a dual problem, not only the pandemic, but also the persistent pathology of oppression which is linked in generative and continuing ways with the pandemic itself. Here, as the sacred teachings of our ancestors in the *Husia* tell us, there are two ways before us: life and death, and we must choose life. And the *Husia* says, to live we must not close down within ourselves, or reduce our relations with others whom we need and who need us. Instead, we must maintain and strengthen our relational closeness, regardless of physical distancing. This means searching for new ways to relate, reaffirm, serve, and support each other in reciprocal and uplifting ways. And we must keep the faith in the

ultimate triumph of truth, justice, and good in the world and work and struggle diligently to bring it into being.

For even in the worst of winters, the eventual return and promise of spring must be kept in mind and prepared for. In the darkest night, the eventual dawning of day must not be doubted. And in the midst of the longest arctic night, we must lift up the light that lasts, and walk and work towards the rising sun and the light, life, and warmth it will bring. I speak here of remembrance and faith, hope and healing, and of love and striving and struggle for good in the world. And within ourselves and within the awesome record and reading of our history, culture and daily lives, there is overwhelming evidence of our capacity to weather this winter and all others like it. Indeed, within the sacred narrative we know as Black history, we are known for a resilience and resourcefulness, a determined durability and adaptive vitality, unique, unsurpassable and second to none. Poet Laureate Gwen Brooks called this special strength and life-affirming, life-preserving and life-enhancing struggle, “bloom in the noise and whip of the whirlwind.” Theologian Howard Thurman called it “riding the storm and remaining intact.” Educator Nannie Burroughs called it “specializing in the wholly impossible.” And our ancestors of Kemet called it emulating the Creator - placemaking in the midst of the void; way-opening in the absence of ways forward, and creating things of beauty and benefit out of love and longing for the good. And it is about, as the ancestors taught in their sacred texts, refusing to walk upside down in darkness and instead, bringing forth the truth and good within us and lifting up the light that lasts and sharing it with each other and the world.

As I have said even before COVID-19, we are injured physicians who must heal, repair, renew and remake ourselves in the process and practice of repairing, renewing, and remaking the world that wounds us. I speak here, especially of overcoming and ending the domination,

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deprivation and degradation of systemic racism and racial capitalism. And I define us as injured physicians who have been grievously and gratuitously injured by oppression and who have it in our power to heal ourselves, repair, renew and remake ourselves in the process and practice of repairing, renewing, and remaking a broken, brutal, and death-dealing world. It is to emphasize our agency, our inherent and developmental capacities to work our will in the world, to be ourselves and free ourselves, and at the same time it is to stress the struggle necessary to be ourselves and free ourselves and end our injury and oppression.

In this bleak and cold-killing winter, it is about searching for ways, people, and places to serve, to support, to reaffirm and reinforce in the interest of a reciprocal and shared good. We start in our homes and communities and reach outward looking beyond to the larger areas of interest, concern and care that progressively includes others in the country and the world. For we are a world African community and the whole world must be our concern also. Indeed, we do not live outside the world; and the systems established for freedom or oppression, justice or injustice, good or evil, are not simply local or national, but worldwide and interrelated as Min. Malcolm taught us. We measure the reality and relevance of our moral conception of ourselves and others by how we all are concerned for, care for and support the most vulnerable in their righteous and similar struggles against oppression and to achieve freedom, enjoy justice and push their lives forward. And this means finding common cause also with other oppressed and struggling people of the world in the expanding concentric circles of our ethical concerns. This begins as Africans with other Africans, nationally and internationally: the peoples of Haiti and South Sudan, Mozambique, and other places of suffering and oppression in Africa; the people of occupied Palestine, invaded Yemen, boycotted

Venezuela and Cuba, the oppressed Uighurs of China and the Rohingya of Myanmar (Burma).

In the midst of the winter night and nightmarish conditions that surround us, we must not lose hope or faith or our commitment to the Good, to life lived in love and sharing, and hard work and righteous and relentless struggle to bring, sustain and increase good in the world. In the middle of the night and nightmare which surrounds us and the white coldness of the worst of winter, we must emulate our ancestors who in spite of worst conditions, as W.E.B. DuBois reminds us, “sang to sunshine.” They would not be defeated by the dark or be undone by the winter of the Holocaust of enslavement, but sang to sunshine, to the coming warmth and renewed life and guiding light it will bring. And we must push back the night, lift up the light that lasts and as Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune taught, “we must discover the dawn,” of dignity-affirming, life-enhancing, world-preserving ways to live in the world and share these ways with our youth and the masses who need them most.

**W**E.B. DUBOIS IN AN ESSAY ON WHAT HE calls our “Sorrow Songs” in his classic text, *Souls of Black Folk*, tells us of the faith of our forefathers and foremothers who sang sorrow songs of faith and hope, songs whose “minor cadences of despair changed often to triumph and calm confidence.” For within these songs of sorrow, there was always a “breathe of hope – a faith in the ultimate justice of things.” And so, in the midst of the centuries, nights of Holocaust, they “sang to sunshine,” and called forth the day and dawn of freedom with work, service, sacrifice, mutual support, and righteous and relentless struggle. For they knew faith without work is dead and that freedom is not free, and justice is not given, but won and secured in constant struggle to overcome all obstacles to them and bring a new world into being.▲

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**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* and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, [www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org](http://www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org); [www.MaulanaKarenga.org](http://www.MaulanaKarenga.org), [www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org](http://www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org); [www.Us-Organization.org](http://www.Us-Organization.org).