



**THE DEATH OF DERRION ALBERT:  
LIVING AND DYING IN AMERICA**  
*Los Angeles Sentinel, 10-15-09, p. A7*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

There has been a torrent of expressions of rightful outrage, profound shock and shared grief over the brutal and callous killing of Derrion Albert of Chicago, 16, honor student, college bound, accidental martyr and routine murder victim, caught up in the larger issue of the way too many young Black males live and die in America. But if we are not careful and continuously attentive, his savage and senseless murder could easily become just another item on the internet among the endless spectacles of life and death, routine shock and shared self-titillation the American media is internationally known for. And after all the presidential promises and expressions of concern, after all the local and national assemblies and calls to action and the media's quick and inevitable exhaustion of interest, it could be repackaged and re-presented as just another day in the 'hood—the expected and accepted, habitual and self-hating violence the dominated, deprived and degraded do to each other.

Even the young people, whose lives and deaths are at the center of these destructive winds of history and human tragedy, show signs of such expectation, acceptance and the accompanying numbing adjustment. Indeed, a group of young people, when asked their opinion on why this happened, replied in unison, "He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time". They are trying to come to terms with the meaninglessness of Derrion's murder by an accessible and simplistic saying. But unintentionally, they collaborate with their attackers and Derrion's killers in denying him, themselves and other young people the right of presence and secu-

rity of person in their own school, city and any neighborhood within this country.

Surely, Derrion had the right to security of person and to go to school and return home without fear, confrontation, attack or loss of life, as do all others. Thus, what was wrong in time and place was the thuggish, thoughtless and brutish destruction of his life, the cold-blooded erasure of his aspirations and future, and the absence of structures and processes to prevent this. Again, this is a question of how Black people, especially young Black males, live and die in America—i.e., devalued and without the appropriate context to grow up in care and security, to develop in dignity, to live and learn in peace, and to imagine and work for a future worthy of respect and support.

Witness the cold-hearted conversation about Derrion's murder causing the city the loss of the Olympics and its embarrassing the city and the country. But it's not about losing the Olympics or about embarrassing the city and country, but about the ruthless and routine destruction of human life. And if there is any embarrassment, it should be on the part of the city and country for such a crude and inhuman conception of its interests and priorities, placing games over life, and for doing so little for so long in promoting life and learning and in preventing death, desperation and self-destruction among young Black males and Black people, and other peoples of color.

This many-sided problem does seem overwhelming and in the most terrible of times, might seem unsolvable. But there is no space in our lives and history for loss of hope, self-pity and surrender, regardless of the odds and understandable apprehensions.

**THE DEATH OF DERRION ALBERT:  
LIVING AND DYING IN AMERICA**

*Los Angeles Sentinel*, 10-15-09, p. A7

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

To triumph over this and the other real and random tragedies we will face, we must correctly define the issues which are not just about youth violence, but also about the social conditions in which this violence is produced and promoted.

Let me rush to reassure those ready for total blame of society, this is in no way my intention. But society is neither innocent nor accidentally involved. On the contrary, it is central to the cause and solution of the problem. For conditions create consciousness and conduct, even as correct consciousness and conduct can and does create improved conditions. Let's face it, to live and die in America for too many young Black males is to live and die in a context which produces psychic dislocation, constant danger and early death. It's to live in a context of paralyzing poverty, faltering and fragile families, hovel-like housing, under and unemployment, constant lumpen lures and coercion, and an educational process which produces disability, disrespect for learning, pessimism about life and conceptions of self negative to self-respect and equal regard for similar others.

It is this structural injustice and systemic violence that spills the first blood, teaches callousness and lack of care and slowly empties the light and joy of life from the eyes, hearts and minds of young people. Clearly, being poor and oppressed is no excuse for cold-blooded killing or conduct unbecoming a human being, and the unrestrained must be restrained. But studies show the impact of positive home and social family environment on human development, especially at an early age and the need for

societal support. Without these, many youth will continue to suffer, self-destruct and eventually cross the tracks.

Clearly, it is on us, as a people, to provide for, protect and guide our children, hold society accountable for its failures and force it to do justice. This requires more than episodic rallies and celebrities sending messages and occasional monies. It necessitates actively joining and increasing local and national corrective efforts. Also, we need to practice the best of our various spiritual and ethical traditions that call us to care for the vulnerable—the poor, ill, aged, young, the isolated, alienated and alone. And we must remove the money chasers and changers from the temple and again teach the good news of social justice and righteous struggle.

Whatever else we do and decide, we must hold fast to our ancient and ongoing ethical concept of ourselves as a people who cares for and keeps safe its own, who sacrifices for the good of present and coming generations, models the pursuit and practice of good we want our youth to emulate, and leaves a legacy worthy of the sacred name and history African. Yes, we need and must insist on societal intervention and support in the interest of justice, but also there is no substitute for positive parenting and active community commitment to assist and support it, especially the most fragile families among us. In a word, we are our own liberators, the workers of our own miracles, the makers of our own magic. And once we see and assert ourselves as such, we are already on the road to a victory which is possible to envision and in the process and practice of actually being achieved.

---

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach, Chair of The Organization Us, Creator of Kwanzaa, and author of *Kawaida and Questions of Life and Struggle: African American, Pan-African and Global Issues*.

[[www.MaulanaKarenga.org](http://www.MaulanaKarenga.org)    [www.Us-Organization.org](http://www.Us-Organization.org)    [www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org](http://www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org)]