



**HEARING THUNDER WITH HARRIET TUBMAN:
REAPING THE HARVESTS OF HISTORY**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

To talk of Harriet Tubman is to speak of one of those special persons who serve as sacred sources and cultural anchors of our expansive self-understanding and whose lives are the precious and heavy metal and material out of which history and hope are hammered. In this month of remembrance and special honor of our foremothers, Black History Month II—Women Focus, let us pay rightful homage to her on March 10, her Day of Remembrance set aside by our shared home state of Maryland. Let us raise and praise her in her righteous names: Whirlwind rider, who saw the lightning, heard the thunder, felt the rain and reaped the harvest. High-rising light in the night, showing the way and will to freedom. Tall-stander, standing up and speaking freedom in the midst of fear and silence. Line-crosser, unlimited by boundaries and unbound by borders. Way-opener, who crossed the rising river, talking life and bringing liberation.

Whenever I think of Harriet Tubman, I begin with her crossing the line to freedom, her sudden joy and subsequent sadness and her repeated return to save others after her own self-liberation. And from this I extract lessons in consciousness, courage, commitment and struggle. Harriet Tubman described her crossing the line from the land of enslavement to the land of freedom as a special and spiritual experience of newness and beauty. She said, “When I found I had crossed that line, I looked at my hands to see if I was the same person. There was such a glory over everything. The sun came like gold over the trees and over the fields and I felt like I was in heaven”. Here she feels the

transformative power of freedom, the sense of breaking chains, both mental and physical, crossing lines and leaping over boundaries, gaining a new conception and consciousness of self. She sees and senses a radiant beauty and splendor over everything. And she is so uplifted, raised so high, she feels like she’s in heaven.

But then a sense of aloneness and loss descend on her. She says, “I had crossed the line. I was free. But there was no one to welcome me to the land of freedom. I was a stranger in a strange land and my home after all was down in the old cabin quarter because my father, my mother and my brothers and sisters and friends were there. But to this solemn resolution I came; I was free, and they should be free also. I would make a home for them in the north and the Lord helping me, I would bring them all there”. And she did for them and so many more. And in this she redefined freedom from its meaning of individual escape to a larger meaning as the collective practice of self-determination in and for community.

Her father and mother from the beginning saw something special in her and began early to prepare her for the journey to freedom she would eventually and inevitably imagine and make. Her father taught her to read the signs of nature, to walk in the woods like a Native American, silent, knowledgeable and self-confident. Indeed, he taught her so well, eventually he could not see or hear her and gave her praise saying, “You walk like an Indian. Not even a leaf makes a rustle, not even a twig cracks back on itself when you come through”.

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And he taught her about the flight of birds and eatable berries, about plants that could kill, cure or be cooked, about the way the wind blows, the stars appear and how to keep warm outdoors in winter. It is this training and her commitment and courage of an incalculable kind that made her able to walk in the midst of the enslavers, lift out her enslaved brother and sister and bring them north to share freedom.

From the outset, she took freedom seriously and made a commitment to “go free or die”. She said, “I had reasoned that out in my mind; there was one of two things I had a right to: liberty or death. If I could not have one, I would have the other; for no one should take me alive. I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasted”. She had passed the threshold, crossed the line to freedom from fear of death. And having done this, she could not be diverted, dispirited or deterred. Hated and hunted by the enslavers, with a \$40,000 bounty on her head, she defied them and death to continuously go south to save, secure and bring to freedom our people. She had been threatened by the enslavers and warned by friends that if the oppressor captured her, they would not simply kill her, but would torture, mutilate and publicly humiliate her before killing her. But still she was not deterred.

An extremely spiritual person, she felt herself God-guided, saw visions, prayed often and prophesied freedom, but always translated everything into liberating action.

Thus, she tells us she did not let the enslaver teach her religion or how to pray, but decided to pray in her own way. She said, “I prayed to God to make me strong and able to fight and that’s what I have prayed for ever since”. It is in that spirit that she, Ashanti woman, moved to the center of the battlefield with her weapon in hand and an unbreakable will.

Harriet Tubman had no love for the enslaver, the oppressor. She had suffered too much from them and seen the savage oppression they imposed on her people. Indeed, she said, “I have heard their groans and sighs and seen their tears and I would give every drop of blood in my veins to free them”. In the tradition of Martin, she first prayed for the enslavers’ conversion. But in the tradition of Malcolm, she prayed that if he wouldn’t convert that he be taken out of the way of her people’s move toward freedom.

Surrounded on all sides by hostile forces and confronted with doubts of those to be freed, Harriet Tubman called for even greater commitment, saying “We must go free or die and freedom is not bought with dust”. Indeed, we stand now again at the crossroads of history with her. And it is an irony of history that for us now the challenge is not freedom or physical death, but real freedom without the cultural death as a people which the so-called post-Black “freedom” would offer us as anonymous and ahistorical Americans.

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