



**KWANZAA'S MEANING IN THE MIDST OF PANDEMIC:
A CENTRAL SITE OF REAFFIRMATION AND RESISTANCE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

EACH YEAR AT KWANZAA WE CELEBRATE the good in and of the world. We celebrate the good of family, community and culture; the good hoped for and harvested, achieved and enjoyed, worked for, witnessed and brought to fruition. Moreover, we celebrate the good of life and love, of health, happiness and wholeness, and the good of the earth and the heavens and all in them. This we do in the best of times and even in the worst of times. And Kwanzaa, as a time of remembrance, reflection and recommitment calls for our commitment to reaffirmation of the good and resistance to all that seeks and tends to prevent, diminish or destroy it.

Clearly, such a commitment to reaffirmation and resistance is valuable and useful in times like these, in the midst of a pandemic that has been so disruptive and disastrous to our lives. Indeed, it is added injury to the pathology of continuing oppression which marks, mars, overtaxes and too often takes our lives. Still, we cannot and must not despair or let ourselves be undone or defeated. And Kwanzaa's insistence on celebrating the good in spite of the dangerous, difficult and demanding times in which we now live our lives, do our work, and wage our struggles offers us an essential foundation and way forward.

These troubled and troubling times of the pandemic called COVID-19 has clearly taken a terrible toll on our lives as a people, and indeed the world. But it has not undone or defeated us. In spite of vaccine inequity, vaccine misinformation and mistrust and no small measure of vaccine rejection for various reasons and continuing oppression in varied forms and places, we still radiate that legendary resilience, resourcefulness and adaptive vitality we are known for globally. But we know and have daily attention-demanding

evidence that all does not come without costs. For still we suffer greatly, even though we wear our wounds well and take our losses without losing hope or faith in a future of expansive good gained in righteous and relentless struggle.

Indeed, we are no novices or strangers to the disease, disaster and death dealing of evil, a deeply rooted and widely spread radical social evil. Whether we talk of the Holocaust of enslavement, the racist savagery of segregation, actual and anticipated deadly police violence or inadequate and inequitable health care that increases our chances for disease and death, we have known and know evil in its various forms and times. And we, as a people, have not only survived these hellish nightmares, but we have prevailed, developed and dared to continue hoping and working and building and achieving and striving and struggling to bring and sustain good in the world.

So, let us reaffirm the good by reaffirming the goodness, sacredness and beauty of ourselves as persons and peoples. Kwanzaa teaches us, it is about reaching back, remembering and raising up the models and mirrors of excellence in our own lives and the lives of our people. It means being self-conscious, self-determining and rooted in the best and most beautiful of our own culture. It means putting aside the pathological language and imagery taught, peddled, pushed and podcast by the oppressor, breaking through the catechism of impossibilities assigned us and achieving goodness against all odds, all naysayers and no-doers.

Indeed, we must constantly conceive and craft new ways to share love, beauty, life necessities, and other goods with each other, regardless of times and circumstances. And we must constantly expand our capacity to

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care, to share, to be other-directed while not sacrificing rightful self-care. For physicians must be rightfully concerned with their own health as they offer pathways of healing and wholeness to us. And the caretakers of loved ones and others must also rightfully take care of themselves so that they can better take care of others and enjoy their work and lives in good and meaningful ways.

Here the issue of *Africanness* is central. For to reaffirm ourselves in the most rightful, relevant and rewarding ways, we must be clear about our primary identity as a people, as Africans, Black people, regardless of other identities we might have and feel strongly about. For our Blackness, our Africanness, our peoplehood, our community is our common ground. Indeed, in our other identities we can identify and find common ground with many others. But in our Blackness, our Africanness, we only share that identity and common ground with each other.

And I say this realizing the claims of Black complexity and openness to many interpretations. But the designation and definition Black presupposes and posits a oneness, a unity of identity rooted in a particular history and culture; a singling out for oppression and a righteous and relentless resistance to it. Indeed, it is Black people who constantly question and contend about their Blackness; others don't find it applicable or useful. Kwanzaa is above all a celebration of Black people, a reaffirmation of their excellence and achievement, their soulfulness and sacredness. So, the question is not who can celebrate Kwanzaa, but who can celebrate Black people in all their excellence, achievement, soulfulness, sacredness and their struggle to be themselves and free themselves, and with others, self-consciously contribute to initiating a new history of humankind.

In the context of oppression and the unfinished fight and struggle to be ourselves and free ourselves from domination, deprivation and degradation, reaffirmation of ourselves and each other is, itself, an act of resistance. In fact, it is a radically transformative act, especially when self-consciously linked to the overarching Movement. One of the things that distinguished Us and our comprehensive philosophy of Kwaaida from other self-defined radical and revolutionary groups in the Sixties is that we strived and struggled for a radical transformation, not only of society and the world, but of *self, society and the world*. With Nana Frantz Fanon, we took the position that a new history of humankind requires a new man and woman to imagine and make it. Moreover, he taught "An authentic national liberation exists only to the precise degree to which each person has irreversibly begun his own liberation."

Thus, reaffirmation of our Africanness and humanity in thought, feelings, speech and practice is a liberating act, an act of resistance to the anti-African and anti-Black systemic racism that would deny our humanity and right to be ourselves and free ourselves. Here the practice of the *Nguzo Saba* (The Seven Principles) becomes a central site and source of both reaffirmation and resistance.

To practice *Umoja* (Unity) is ultimately to unite in principle and actions that reaffirm our oneness and shared commitment to the good, to African and human good, and the well-being of the world. To practice *Kujchagulia* (Self-determination) is to reject oppression and insist in word and struggle on our right and responsibility to be ourselves and to free ourselves. To practice *Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility) is to resist attempts to divide us and to work and

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struggle together in liberating ways to build the good world we all want and deserve.

To practice *Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics) is to reaffirm everyone's right to a life of dignity and decency and to struggle for equitable access to the shared and common good of the world. To practice *Nia* (Purpose) is to embrace the righteous vocation of the liberation and upraising of our people and opening the way for their flourishing and coming into the fullness of themselves. To practice *Kuumba* (Creativity) is to struggle against destructive tendencies wherever we find them and to practice *serudj ta*, the Maatian ethical imperative to repair, renew

and remake the world, making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

And to practice the principle of *Imani* (Faith) is to believe in ourselves and our people, in the goodness of life, of rightful relationships with the world and all in it, and in the righteousness and victory of our struggle. Here the personal and collective are linked in radically transformative initiatives to bring an inclusive, shared and sustained good in the world. And this is the essential meaning and motivation of reaffirmation and resistance.▲

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