



**THE MORAL VOCATION OF LEADERSHIP:  
DEDICATION, DISCIPLINE AND SERVICE**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 11-04-10, p.A7*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

The problem of leadership, like the loss of love and faith, is complex and ongoing and has produced various distorted forms and failures in every community. Its various unworthy forms include leadership as domination, mystification, manipulation, drafted celebrity posturing, soft-shoe proxy performances for outside sources and image management thru public relations. The rightful criticism of these forms have not always been precise or insightful and most fit within general declarations of pathology concerning everything Black. Thus, it would be easy to add to this pathological discourse of self-mutilation and miss at least two essential points.

First, whatever is said about Black leadership, that which passes as leadership or government in the large and small “White houses” around the country deserve at least similar criticism and condemnation. Indeed, this lack of White leadership is found not just in the preference for campaign character assassination over needed policy discussion, but also in the indicting presence of millions homeless and hungry in a citadel of vaunted wealth. It is found also in the immorality of lives lost and resources wasted in an unjust, unjustifiable and unwinnable war, and in the fear and hatred of others and violations of human and civil rights peddled as patriotism and preventive protection. And it is found in the brutal fact of families, schools, health care systems, levees, bridges and whole cities brittle, bruised and broken for lack of ethical vision, values and needed initiative.

Second, as Black leaders know, the problem and challenge of Black leadership is tied to the problems created by White leadership and its followers, from the Holocaust of enslavement to segregation, racism, inequitable distribution of wealth and power, Katrina and

other unconscionable catastrophes of criminal intent and neglect. And add to this their constant seductive and coercive calls for moral compromise, racial self-concealment and historical amnesia concerning our struggle for social justice. Thus, African American leadership has been forged and founded in the crucible of struggle to transform this society into a real rather than racial realm of freedom, justice and human flourishing. Real African American leaders come to the ground of struggle and the table of negotiation, then, not with lack of credentials or self-effacing hat-grabbing and grins. Rather they come as self-conscious carriers of a venerable tradition of a people honored the world over as a moral and social vanguard and a model to lift up and emulate in the ongoing struggle for freedom, justice and good in the world.

The need, then, is to reject the distorted forms of leadership often literally laid at our door from outside sources or internally generated thru flaws which originate in and out of oppression. Our task is to dialog with African culture—continental and diasporan—and recover and reconstruct our best ideas and practices and apply them in developing the discipline of leadership, and in rebuilding the Movement. For the Movement will certainly be a resource-rich context for maximum development and the collective thrust needed for realizing larger goals in the interest of common good.

If we’ve learned anything from the leaders we admire and praise, we know that leadership in an African sense is, above all, a moral vocation of dedication, discipline and service. This can be seen in sacred texts like the *Husia* and *Odu Ifa* and in the cultural conceptions of leadership contained in African languages themselves. For example, in the

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language of Swahili, the word to lead, *kuongoza* gives us an idea of the expansive conception of leadership held by our ancestors. The word *kuongoza*, to lead, means in its various senses, to guide in the right way, cause to improve character and conduct, instruct well and rightly, make successful, and cause to prosper. At the heart of leadership, then, is a commitment to cultivation and transformation in the interest of the right, the beneficial and the good. Thus, another sense of this word in its form *wongofu* means uprightness and righteousness, suggesting a moral commitment and character of the producer, process and the product, in a word, of the leader, the vocation of leading and the led.

It is in this context that leadership is conceived as a moral vocation in which persons rightly guided and grounded in the best of social-ethical views and values and skilled practices share these with others, and aid them in enhancing their capacity to satisfy needs, expand aspirations and pursue the good and goods of life. Vocation here means life work or mission, self-consciously chosen and a rightful path to pursue in life. Within this ancient African understanding of leadership as a moral vocation, Kawaida develops its working definition of this critical practice in the context of our time and the demands of our struggle for good in the world. Kawaida defines leadership as *the self-conscious capacity and commitment to provide a philosophy, a set of principles, and a program which inspire a personal and social practice that not only satisfies human needs, but transforms people in the process, making them self-conscious*

*agents of their own lives and liberation.* Such a transformative process will, of necessity, also lead to the building of moral community and to the constant becoming of the best of what it means to be African and human in the fullest sense.

Although leadership roles may be thrust on persons in any given time or context, they must quickly decide at the earliest possible moment the level of their capacity and commitment to leadership. This is the meaning in a larger sense of accepting the invitation of history, i.e., choosing to accept responsibility thrust on one by time and circumstance, especially a challenge of great historical importance. This is exemplified in Harriet Tubman at the crossroads of freedom and enslavement deciding whether to simply escape herself or give her life to the liberation of her people. It is reflected in Martin Luther King's choosing whether to live a life of restricted middle class comfort in the midst of racist oppression or responding to the call of his community to resistance. It is demonstrated in Malcolm X's deciding whether to remain lost in his lumpen life of self-orientation or discipline himself, ground himself in his faith and knowledge, and prepare himself to become a noble witness and world-historical servant of his people. And it is expressed in Fannie Lou Hamer's choosing whether to remain time-keeper and racial captive in the killing fields of Mississippi, or put down her pencil and paper, question the concept and practice of America and dedicate her life to service, sacrifice and struggle for her people.

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