



**MAINTAINING THE MEANING OF JUNETEENTH:
STAYING FOCUSED ON FREEDOM**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THIS IS A KAWAIDA POSITION STATEMENT ON rightly celebrating Juneteenth as a day of freedom as distinct from a day of unreflective Americana – red soda water, bop-pin', barbecuin', flag waving, etc. It speaks against fostering images of a darker version of the 4th of July without Frederick Douglass at the podium making necessary distinctions in our minds. It is to remind us of the long and continuing fight for freedom, the awesome sacrifices made, the hopes fulfilled and the long journey still to be travelled over rough and uneven terrain, steep inclines and enveloping valleys. For as our ancestors taught, “freedom ain’t free.” Indeed, it’s not cheap, but comes with great cost and many casualties, but as they also promise us, victory is certain.

The celebration of freedom is to be encouraged and applauded everywhere and all the time, and the celebration of Juneteenth, June 19th as Emancipation Day, is, of necessity, no exception. For freedom is so essential to our lives, our concepts of ourselves and our understanding of what it means to live and flourish as human beings. In this context, Min. Malcolm X makes freedom the most essential value in his ethical insistence on freedom, justice and equality as non-negotiable needs and rights of the human person. Thus, he states that “freedom is essential to life itself” and equally, “freedom is essential to the development of the human being.” Moreover, he says, “if we don’t have freedom we can never expect justice and equality.” For “only after we have freedom, does justice and equality become a reality.”

It is this ethical insight and emphasis on the priority of human freedom as the condition and context for justice, equality and human flourishing that leads Min. Malcolm to argue the right to pursue and achieve “freedom by any means necessary.” This phrase is not a claim to do even the unethical, but is a cornerstone in his ethics of self-defense against op-

pression, his reaffirmation of the right of resistance to all forms of racist violence – police, vigilante and general systemic violence. It also represents his call for a courageous commitment to give all that’s necessary to be free men and women, and stand upright and worthy among persons, peoples and nations of the world.

So, when we celebrate Juneteenth, drink the red soda water, eat the barbecue, turn up the music, and march and dance in the streets, let’s not forget to stay focused on freedom. And let’s remember and continue the struggles of our ancestors which gave birth to hope and brought freedom into being. And let us say with the Hon. Marcus Garvey, “No better gift can I give in honor of the memory of the love of my foreparents for me, and in gratitude of the suffering they endured that I might be free, no grander gift can I bear to the sacred memory of the generations past than a free and redeemed Africa,” i.e., both the Continent and Diaspora.

To celebrate Juneteenth rightfully and righteously as a day of freedom is first of all to have the right interpretation of what happened on that day, June 19, 1865, and to tell it in a way that honors and praises our people, not the oppressor. Nor must we divert the discussion to Whites, who may have assisted us in some way or even worse introduce imaginary White saviors in the discussion. Surely, the Union troops arrived with news of Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation. But that did not really free the enslaved Africans, it only offered a legal ground for it that was not always or fully enforced. And even if it were rightly and fully enforced, the people, themselves, would still need to decide to be free and act in freedom in order for freedom to take hold in any real and relevant sense.

So, it’s not the news and troops alone that brought freedom. It was the conscious decision of the enslaved Africans to be free, to walk away from the fields, to throw down

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their tools in the yards, to take off their aprons in the kitchens and their colonial costumes in the parlors and walk defiantly out. And finally, it was their decision to stop the horses, get out of the buggy, and let Miss Daisy (or Miss Ann) and her man drive themselves or walk wearily back to that house of horrors they called home.

Secondly, we must recognize and respect the fact that there was a psychology of freedom needed then and the same is needed now. We must, as our ancestors, will ourselves to be free and act accordingly. Free men and women are responsible persons, responsible not only for the consequences of their actions, but also for taking initiative and acting in their own image and interest. To act in our own image is to act as Black people, African people, who have both the right and responsibility to exist as a self-conscious, righteous, freedom-fighting and justice seeking people. It is to celebrate ourselves and our awesome march thru human history with an unapologetic sense of identity, dignity and determination. And to act in our own interest is to act always to free and uplift the people, to imagine and build the new and just communities, societies and world we all want and deserve. And as our ancestors also taught, it is to speak truth, do justice, be kind, pursue peace, and always do what is good.

Moreover, to celebrate rightfully, we must call our people by their rightful name, Africans, and describe their condition as an imposed and coerced one, "enslaved," not simply collapse their identity and condition into one word, "slave," as if it were the natural condition of a nameless, cultureless, non-historical being. There is no respect or rightful recognition of their identity, dignity and humanity, if we call them simply "slaves," as if they have no ancestral home, history or cul-

ture, and as if Blacks are so identified with enslavement one needs no qualifier.

Thus, we must call them *enslaved Africans* so that when we tell their story it reflects their and our real identity, rightfully links us to the longest of human histories, to a land and peoples of great learning, profound spirituality, exquisite art and bodies of sacred texts second to none. And let it remind us of their unjust and savage enslavement, the Holocaust it brought, the great sacrifice and suffering, and the morally monstrous destruction of human life, human culture and human possibility.

Let us make this a day, then, a time of reflection, remembrance and recommitment, as well as one of food, festival and fun. Indeed, it is important that we avoid transforming Juneteenth into a Black 4th of July with imported miniature flags, mindless bouts and binges of feasting and drinking, false consciousness about freedom, and a perverse and pathetic patriotism that teaches hatred of others, especially the weak, vulnerable and dark peoples of the world. Instead, let's mark off the fields for the cultivation of a consciousness of our history and a commitment to our ancestors in the righteous ways we live our lives, do our work and wage our struggles.

AND IN THAT CONSCIOUSNESS AND COMMITMENT, let us reaffirm in practice that in the final analysis, any serious celebration of freedom requires ongoing efforts and struggle to secure and sustain freedom and pass it on as a legacy for future generations. Anything less is diversion and self-deception, hardly the hallmark and history of those courageous ones among us who used to say, sing and pursue in practice this battle-cry: "my mind is stayed on freedom and I ain't gon' let nobody turn me 'round."▲

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