



**MALCOLM'S LESSONS OF LIFE AND STRUGGLE:
AN ETHICS OF SERVICE AND SACRIFICE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THIS IS THE MONTH AND YEAR THAT MARKS the 52nd anniversary of the martyrdom and murder of Malcolm X, his assassination and ultimate sacrifice for the love and liberation of his people and the advancement of the cause of human freedom and flourishing in the world. For Us and our people, Africans everywhere, he will always be in the words of the sacred *Husia*: “a glorious spirit in heaven and a continuing powerful presence on earth. He shall be counted and honored among the ancestors. His name shall endure as a monument and what he has done on earth shall never perish or pass away.”

On this 52nd anniversary of his sacrifice and in the midst of our continuous resistance and the rising hurricane of hatred and oppression surrounding us, we rightly raise and praise his name, hold him up as a mirror and model of how we can live our lives, and give them up in service and even sacrifice, if need be. We focus here, not only on his assassination, but on his sacrifice, not on what the oppressor and his conscious or unconscious collaborators did, rather we place his assassination and martyrdom in the larger context of his life of service, organizing, building, teaching, courageous and uncompromising struggle, and righteous witnessing to the world for us and all those he called “the oppressed and downtrodden dark peoples of the world” which culminated in his martyrdom.

Malcolm enters the battlefield as a Black man and a Muslim and he does not sacrifice one identity and obligation for the other. He tells us in his *Autobiography* that at the beginning of his ministerial mission that he “had pledged on (his) knees to Allah” that he would teach the truth to expose the crimes of the oppressor and open the minds and eyes of his people. And he says, “This was my attitude. These were my uncompromising words uttered everywhere, without hesitation or fear.” Here Malcolm models and mirrors the courageous uncompromising commitment to truth, justice and freedom which defined his life and offers a lesson for us all, especially in the face

of the current terrorizing actions of the established order.

Moreover, he tells Muslim youth in a lecture in Cairo, 1964, “As a Muslim, I feel duty-bound to fight for the spread of Islam. . .but I am also one of the 22 million oppressed African Americans, and I can never overlook the miserable plight of my people in America. Therefore, my fight is twofold, my burden is double, my responsibilities multiple. . .material as well as spiritual, political as well as religious, racial as well as non-racial.” Thus, he says he will “never hesitate to let the entire world know the hell my people suffer from America’s deceit, and her hypocrisy as well as her oppression.”

Clearly, there are no traces of tragic self-denial and self-deforming declarations of being “blackish,” here and no self-deceptive and self-paralyzing illusions of post-racial America. Malcolm understood and taught that we struggle against three overarching forms of domination and unfreedom, “political oppression, economic exploitation and social degradation.” And he knew that it is one of the greatest challenges of the oppressed to overcome is the social and human degradation that cultivates self-hatred, self-condemnation, self-mutilation in a people and makes them more vulnerable to the will and wiles of the diabolical oppressor.

The need, then, Malcolm states is to “wake up, clean up and stand up.” It is, he teaches, imperative to wake up to our history and humanity, to the dignity and divine-given righteous nature and tendencies toward good within us. He wants us to seek, speak and treasure the upraising and liberating truth which “will truly set us free,” empower us and “give us strength and knowledge” to win and build the good and righteous world we’ve struggled so hard to bring into being.

Malcolm taught us, too, we must clean up: achieve moral grounding. This means stop being unjust to ourselves, injuring ourselves and each other; love each other; practice mutual self-

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giving, brotherhood and sisterhood; speak truth, do justice and strive together to build the strong and caring families and communities in which we can thrive and flourish. We must, Malcolm taught, demonstrate agency, the capacity and will to change ourselves, radically reconstruct ourselves, giving up the vices and self-injuring views and values of the oppressor and cultivating virtues that enrich our lives and advance our struggle. And once we achieve this, he says, it “makes us more godly, more godlike, more righteous,” more in tune with the Divine, more blessed and stronger and thus, it enhances our capacity “to accomplish our aims.”

Malcolm had said in describing his willingness to give his own life for the love and liberation of his people and the advancement of human rights, human freedom and human flourishing that “This is a time for martyrs.” But he did not expect that everyone would have to or be willing to sacrifice themselves in a similar way. Sacrifice, as self-giving, allows for a wider range of giving of self than the ultimate sacrifice that brings death. We self-give when we serve, when we as Malcolm taught, bear righteous witness and live and leave our lives “as a testimony of some social value,” in a word, practice a self-conscious ethics of service and sacrifice.

Surely, before Malcolm made the ultimate sacrifice, he gave us a life of self-sacrificing and service in numerous beautiful and uplifting ways. His faith and his culture taught him that we honor our faith, uphold our best tradition and measure our morality by how we treat the most vulnerable among us. Thus, as I’ve said elsewhere, “Min. Malcolm built and supervised programs to give food to the hungry, homes to the homeless, treatment to the addict, freedom to the captive,

jobs to the unemployed, spiritual anchor to the drifting and ethical grounding to those caught up in the whirlwind of self-injuring and self-destructive practices.”

Malcolm teaches us also, to stand up; stand up in righteous resistance, to be witnesses and midwives to a new world coming: one conceived and reconstructed in struggle, founded in freedom, justice, peace and caring and made lasting by a flourishing rooted in self-conscious sharing of good. But Malcolm challenges us to think and act radically, for only this will lead to the radical reconstruction of society and the world required in times like these. Indeed, he says, “I know of no group that is promising unless it’s radical; if it’s not radical, it’s in no way involved *effectively* in the struggle” (emphasis mine).

Finally, Malcolm returns repeatedly to stress consciousness and knowledge as key to the liberation struggle, to knowing our oppressor and ourselves. But he puts special emphasis on our knowing ourselves, not only in rational ways, but in loving and caring ways. In this way we are able to overcome and prevent division and disabling conflict and build a united community to confront, fight and defeat our oppressor.

Therefore, he tells and teaches us “We need more light about each other. Light creates understanding; understanding creates love; love creates patience; and patience creates unity.” In such a context of knowledge, understanding, love, patience and unity, he says, we will be able to overcome our internal weakness, build the Black united front we need to wage righteous and relentless struggle and unite in strength with other oppressed, progressive and struggling people to bring into being a new history and way of relating and being human in the world.

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