



**LIVING THE LEGACY OF DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.:
A SACRED NARRATIVE AND MODEL**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Within the sacred narrative we know as Black history, there is a long list of prophets, messengers, saints and holy men and women, who walked the world from its beginning trying to discern the Divine, who heard the call of heaven and history and stood up and went forth to seek and speak truth, promote and do justice and bring good in the world. The Most Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is such a person. Both his life and death offer us invaluable lessons about how we are to understand and assert ourselves in the world as both persons and a people. He taught us to value the sacredness of human life, arguing against capital punishment, war, police brutality and other forms of official violence as well as unofficial violence among human beings. He was especially opposed to wars of aggression and occupation like those against Vietnam, Haiti, Palestine, Iraq, and Afghanistan. And he taught us to love peace, cherish freedom, pursue justice and sacrifice for them.

Dr. King left us not only a world historical legacy of thought and practice, but defined us as a moral and social vanguard in this country and the world. Indeed, at the heart of his ethical philosophy is his recognition and reaffirmation of the rights, dignity, divine destiny and potentiality of Black people. He posed us as a people whose social situation, suffering and profound spirituality had prepared us for a divine historical mission. It was, he taught, not only a mission of liberating ourselves, but also of restructuring and spiritualizing U.S. society and offering a paradigm of human liberation to the world. Thus, he states that “first we must massively assert our dignity and worth; ...stand up amidst a system that still op-

presses us and develop an unassailable majestic sense of values, (and) no longer be ashamed of being Black.” On the contrary, we must see in ourselves the image of the Divine and accept the divine mission to repair and free ourselves in the process of restructuring and freeing this country from the triple evils of “racism, materialism and militarism.”

Dr. King rightly saw that unless we believe in ourselves, we could not believe in or successfully carry out our mission. And thus, he called for respect for the Divine in us and for what he called “a divine dissatisfaction” with the wrongs and evils of the world—oppression, injustice, inequality and war. And he called on us to struggle in such a way that “when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say ‘there lived a great people—a black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.’ ” Indeed, he said: “This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility.”

Secondly, Dr. King argued that we had both the moral right and responsibility to resist evil and injustice, including disobeying the established order and its unjust laws. He maintained that our “highest loyalty is to God and not to the mores, or folkways, the state or the nation or any man-made institution.” Thus, when a man-made law conflicts with moral law and reasoning, we have not only the right but the responsibility to resist it. Moreover, he said that justice for Black people will not come simply from court decisions or from legislation, but from a “radical restructuring of U.S. society.”

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Closely related to the above concept is Dr. King's contention that it is immoral and cowardly to collaborate in one's own oppression. One collaborates first when one accepts oppression. For he says, "to accept passively an unjust system is to cooperate with that system." One also collaborates when one turns a blind eye to injustice. For "to ignore evil is to become an accomplice to it." Thus, we must not ignore the grave injustice of government criminal neglect and negligence during and after Katrina, nor watch silently and passively as wars of aggression consume countless lives and resources and poison human relations in the world.

Fourthly, Dr. King, like all our great leaders, taught that religion must have a social role as well as a spiritual one. Indeed, he taught they are interrelated. A true religion, he states, is obligated to deal "with the whole man; not only with his soul but also with his body, not only with his spiritual well-being, but also with his social well-being." Thus, he asked us to develop a world perspective, respect the sacredness of life everywhere and struggle steadfast in our faith in the capacity for human good in the world.

Finally, Dr. King taught us the centrality of struggle, not only to free ourselves, but also to repair, transform and strengthen

ourselves in the ongoing efforts to build and sustain the Beloved Community or good world. "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable," he stated. "Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle." Moreover, he said, "freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." Indeed, he continues, "freedom has always been an expensive thing" and as history shows, "is rarely gained without sacrifice and self-denial."

It was Dr. King's hope that we could together build a good world, a beloved community of humanity based on mutual respect, non-violence, peace, justice and cooperation for common good. Here he linked peace and justice, stating that "peace is not simply the absence of tension but (also) the presence of justice." Dr. King ends where he begins, calling on us to step forward as a people and with other oppressed and progressive peoples of the world, continue to weather the hurricanes of history and to wage the ongoing struggle to create the good world we all want and deserve. "The battle is in our hands," he tells us, "the road ahead is not altogether a smooth one. There are no broad highways that lead us easily and inevitably to quick solutions, but we must keep going."

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