



**LIFTING UP LOWERY, VIVIAN AND LEWIS:  
LIVING THE LEGACY, FREEING THE PEOPLE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**T**HE RECENT PASSING OF REV. JOSEPH Lowery (October 6, 1921 - March 27, 2020), Rev. Cordy Tindell (C.T.) Vivian (July 30, 1924 - July 17, 2020), and Rep. John Lewis (February 21, 1940 - July 17, 2020), three major leaders of the civil rights phase of the Black Freedom Movement, rightfully causes and encourages us to lift them up and to recount and reflect on the lessons of their lives and to strive to honor their legacy in meaningful ways. This means moving any serious consideration of them and their legacy beyond the usual media portrayals and official Americana that separates them from their people and claims them as ethnically anonymous American heroes, rather than recognizing them as great *African Americans* who have significantly and decisively contributed to transforming the racist conception and functioning of this country. And it means we must claim them ourselves and define and discuss them in our own terms. Moreover, it means we must strive to live their legacy and continue the unfinished and ongoing struggle they inherited, embraced and advanced to free our people and expand the realm of freedom and justice in this country to include all.

Clearly, there are several lessons to be gleaned from the legacy of these freedom warriors and workers for a new society and world. And the first is to rightfully locate them in Black history among their people, our people in the midst of an unfinished and ongoing Black freedom struggle. Indeed, there can be no correct understanding, appropriate appreciation or honest emulation of their lives and the lives of all those who preceded them and made them and us possible and of those who were their co-combatants, unless we place them all in the context of their people, our people, Black people and our struggle.

Min. Malcolm X calls this determining where we fit in the historical and global scheme of things. Molefi Asante calls it locating ourselves. And Rev. Lowery tells us also that locating ourselves historically and socially is

important. Indeed, he says, “If you don’t know where you came from, it’s difficult to determine where you are. (And) it’s even more difficult to plan where you are going.” Again, this stresses the need for us to remain at the center of our own history, self-conscious agents of our own liberation.

A second lesson from the lives of these men and the generation of giants like Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, Ella Baker, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Kwame Ture of which they were a part, is that they were fighters and workers in the Black Freedom Movement which demanded Freedom Now!, took freedom rides, sang freedom songs, and studied and taught at freedom schools. Indeed, it is this struggle, the Black Freedom Movement which brought them into being, moulded their consciousness, and defined their commitment. And it is this sacred struggle for freedom to which they were a defining part, offered their lives in dedication, discipline and sacrifice.

And I stress here the distinction between the Black Freedom Movement and the Civil Rights Movement, which was one phase of our freedom struggle. The Black Power Movement, in which my organization Us and I played a major role, was also a phase. And freedom is what we have struggled and continue to struggle also for in these latest resistance initiatives against police violence and systemic racism. Here I define freedom as conditions and capacities, not repressed or restrained by domination, deprivation and degradation, and which allow and enable persons to pursue the good and come into the fullness of themselves. Thus, freedom is a larger concept than civil rights and is a human right, which, as our people have argued in their struggles in this country, is a natural and God-given right which no government can take away or give. For all the freedom warriors and workers we honor, then, and for ourselves, we must not reduce our struggle to a general civil rights struggle or be absentees from our own history, a history of struggle

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for the liberation of our people, upheld as a model and mirror around the world.

I have defined these three freedom fighters' legacies as ultimately one legacy, a shared legacy. And this is our third lesson to be gleaned from the lives of these honored freedom warriors. For their legacies are part of a shared legacy of struggle of their people, our people, Black people, African people. And at its very heart and soul, it is a legacy of great moral and social importance. For from its inception, this struggle sought to free an oppressed people, our people, and in the process, expand the realm of freedom, justice and equality in this country and the world to include all. For it was and remains our understanding that freedom, justice and equality are indivisible human goods. In a word, the Black agenda has always been an inclusive agenda. And this inclusive conception of our task is found also in Rep. Lewis' assertion that "Our minds, souls and hearts cannot rest until freedom and justice exist for all people."

There is no greater lesson than the lesson offered by Rev. Lowery, Rev. Vivian, Rep. Lewis and all the others who have dedicated their lives in struggle to the people than a deep and enduring love of the people. And each put their lives on the line in audacious demonstration of it. Speaking of Rosa Parks' love of and dedication to our people, Rev. Lowery says that "Rosa Parks became an instrument of the people's will" for freedom and thus, she "sat down so her people could stand up." And she accepted the responsibility of the consequences. Rev. Vivian tells us to measure the quality of what we do, not only by how well we do it, but also by its service to the people. He says, "Do what you do well. But always ask yourself the question: Is it serving people?"

A final lesson gleaned from the lives of Rev. Lowery, Rev. Vivian and Rep. Lewis and

the struggle they inherited, embraced and advanced is that the struggle to expand the realm of freedom and justice in the world must continue and intensify till victory is won. Rev. Vivian invites us to understand our radical revolutionary efforts as defensive, not offensive, for we are the ones under constant attack. Thus, he says, "Revolution is always an act of self-defense." And this is a shared position clearly held by Nana Harriet Tubman, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X and our organization Us.

Indeed, the struggle we continue to wage as a people is in rightful and righteous defense of our humanity, our human rights and our very lives. Rev. Vivian tells us that "Leadership is found in action to defeat that which would defeat you." And "You are made by the struggles you choose." Rep. Lewis tells us "We have a mission and moral mandate to be on the right side of history." Thus, he says, "I appeal to all of you to get into this great revolution that is sweeping the nation. Get in and stay in the streets of every city, every village and hamlet of this nation until true freedom comes."

**F**INALLY, REV. LOWERY TELLS US THAT "Each of us has to assume responsibility" for the struggle. "We cannot wait for others," he says, "We must do it ourselves," each and everyone. "It is a moral imperative. We must seize the challenge" and continue and intensify the struggle. "We've got mountains to climb. We've got grief to overcome. And we've got burdens to bear" in this unfinished ongoing liberation struggle. But as he, they and all our ancestors assure us, we are well-suited and sufficient to the task, regardless of the odds and obstacles. For as our foremother, Nana Burroughs taught us, as a people, "We specialize in the wholly impossible." ▲

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