



**BEING ABOUT THE GOOD:
LIFE LESSONS OF MUHAMMAD NASSERDEEN**
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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

His name was Muslim; his faith was Christian; and the way he walked in the world was upliftingly African, doing honor to his family, justice to his faith and enduring good for his people and the world. His life, like those of other men and women of his character and kind, offers an abundance of lessons that enlighten and lift us up and lead us to the good and rightful way of being the best of who we are and strive to be. His first name, Muhammad, means Praised One, one worthy of great praise, and his last name, Nasserdeen, means Victory of the Faith. Already, his parents had signaled and encoded his life's mission in his name—to always walk worthy in the world, to be praised among the people, and to bring honor and victory to the faith you follow by embodying in your daily life the principles you put forth as the foundation of your faith. This is the first lesson of his life.

Anybody who knows anything about Muhammad Nasserdeen knows he was about business—thinking business, teaching business, garnering support for business, increasing the capacity and quality of business and passing at work at his desk. But everybody also knows and needs to remember always that it was his commitment to community, to us as a self-determining, self-empowering people, that was the source of his passion and the central motivation and meaning of his work. Business was the profession and path he chose to follow to do his work. But it was always about community, about how we relate to, serve and support each other. For he knew what we all know and at our weakest, worst or most inattentive moment tend to forget: that how we relate makes certain our success or ensures our failure. This too is another of his life lessons: that

we must be about more than ourselves, more than money-making or our personal interests; that we must always be about doing good in our community and the world.

At the heart of his work was the practice and project of “recycling Black dollars”, spending our \$723 billion purchasing power within the Black community, “putting dollars in another Black hand”, turning it over as many times as possible before it leaves the community. As he used to say, “It’s as simple as that. If you bank at a Black bank; if you go to Black cleaners; if you go to Black restaurants; if you go to Black-owned theatres, you are recycling Black dollars. And every time you do that you have a strong impact.” And this impact is not only that we strengthen Black businesses, but also that we increase their capacity to provide jobs and opportunities of ownership, investment, etc., contribute to important social projects, pursue necessary development, expand the community economy, and transfer wealth to the next generation, producing a strong sense of well-being among us.

Tied to the idea of recycling Black dollars was the need to put the business community and larger community in a mutually-beneficial relationship. This approach of building and sustaining mutually-beneficial relationships between persons and persons, businesses and businesses, and businesses and community offers us another important lesson from his life. It is a lesson from two principles of the *Nguzo Saba* (The Seven Principles): *Ujamaa* (Cooperative Economics), shared work and shared wealth; and *Ujima* (Collective Work and Responsibility) for building a strong community economic base

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as essential to the health, strength and wholeness of the community.

Thus, Nasserdeen stressed reciprocity, mutual respect, mutual commitment and mutual benefit for businesses and the community. So, even as he worked hard for support of Black business, he demanded from them the highest level of service for our people. "We don't think that you should patronize a business just because it's Black," he said. "It is incumbent upon any business to deliver quality service in a quality manner at fair prices." And "Once you discover they do that, then you should patronize them, because it helps our community and our economy overall as a people."

So, he began by founding and building an organization, Recycling Black Dollars, August 1988. His program had two interlocking parts: to increase Black community patronage and support of Black business and to increase the capacity and quality of black business delivery of goods and service to the community. As a business man, he turned naturally to the project of increasing businesses' capacity and quality of delivery. As he said, he wanted "to teach our people to do business the right way". Thus, he provided seminars and lectures and gave assistance in formulating business plans, marketing, networking and securing opportunities for grounding and growth.

He launched campaigns of support for banks and other businesses, started a newsletter, resource guide and directory, and a radio program to advance his principles and program. He produced a process of lifting up and honoring models of success

worthy of emulation, held mixers and luncheons at Black business sites for networking and practicing the principles he taught. This too is a lesson from Nasserdeen's life: that whatever we claim, wish for or want, if it's real and worthy, it requires dedication, discipline and hard work and we must get busy doing what it takes to achieve it. As he said, "Don't just talk about it, be about it."

Muhammad Nasserdeen was a master at involving us in his projects, using our similarities as a basis of unity and our differences as sources of enrichment and varieties of good we brought to the table and tasks at hand. This too was one of his lessons: finding common ground in the midst of our diversity and building on it in the interest of common good. He had invited me to talk on the essentiality of culture, views and values that undergird and inspire our efforts towards excellence at his seminars, his Change Banks Campaign and on his radio program, the Positive Side, on a range of community and world issues.

It was truly a Divine blessing and deeply Black thing to have known him; to experience the warm way he welcomed us; the eagerness with which he engaged us about business and being about the good; the depth of his laughter that lost us in it and the sure and certain faith he had in our capacities and possibilities as a people. And so, as we remember him and the enduring good he has done for us, let us also remember his family and do for them an equally worthy and ongoing good.