



GROUNDING AND CENTERING OURSELVES: CHOSEN TO BRING GOOD IN THE WORLD

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

SOMETIMES IT IS GOOD TO STOP in the midst of the hustle and bustle of every day and sit down and remember and reflect on people we've known and know; places we've been and are in now; positions we've taken and take now; where we've come from and are going; and what we've done and want to keep doing, regardless. I raise this as a seasoned soldier of Us, a Simba, having been on the battlefield and battlefield for more than half a century, and who has no intention of retiring, changing course or receiving a revelation that makes me minimize the importance of the Black Liberation Movement we of Us helped build during the 60s and 70s or that points me in any direction except forward in love and struggle on the upward paths of our honored ancestors.

But even in the midst of battle, it is good to reflect on who we are and what we are actually fighting for, to examine and affirm the substance and solidness of the ground on which we stand. Thus, in the context of the encouraging and expanding struggles being waged since Ferguson, such pause for remembrance, reflection and reaffirmation becomes a way of internal strengthening, a cultural and spiritual centering that secures us against disorienting doubt, disabling despair and a bitterness born of a sense of failure, imagined grievances against others and unannounced insecurities within ourselves, and ultimately abandonment of the struggle when obstacles, crises and crushing blows come. Indeed, this is one of the things that distinguishes the members of Us from others who walked away from the struggle, embittered, aggrieved and blaming imaginary enemies and hated opponents for their failure to achieve and endure.

The key to our continuing commitment, courage, strength and struggle, then, is a deep-seated sense and understanding of our identity, purpose and direction as persons and a people. And as an African people, we have an infinite-

ly rich and rewarding treasure of sacred literature of spiritual and ethical teachings to give us solid ground on which to stand and provide us with a world-encompassing conception of ourselves, our mission and righteous ways and means to achieve it.

It is a foundational teaching of our honored ancestors in the sacred text, *The Odu Ifa*, that we "humans are divinely *chosen* to bring good in the world" and that this is the fundamental meaning and mission of human life. Odu (78:1) says, "Let's do things with joy, for surely humans have been divinely chosen to bring good into the world". This is a unique teaching in the moral and theological thinking of the world, for it makes all humans divinely chosen, not one group chosen over and above or over and against all others. Rather, it assigns every human being the personal and collective responsibility to bring good in the world. Moreover, the word for human being(s) is the same word for "chosen one(s)", i.e., *eniyan*, making it so we can't say "human being" without saying "chosen one" and we can't claim being chosen in any divinely intended way except as a fellow human being among and with other human beings in the shared task of bringing good into the world. Surely, this calls for and requires a "racial" and religious modesty not always embraced or expressed.

Now, Odu 78:1 also tells us that if we are going to bring good in the world, we must achieve certain essential goals: full knowledge of things for all; happiness everywhere; peace inside and out; harmony with nature; health; security and well-being. And to achieve these seven overarching goals, the Odu tells us we must have at a minimum: "wisdom; a compelling desire for good character and internal strength". Then, the sacred text lengthens the list of required attributes and practices saying that "the things needed to bring about the good

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condition in the world are: wisdom adequate to govern the world; sacrifice; character; *the love of doing good* for all people, especially those in need and those who seek assistance from us; and the eagerness and struggle to increase good in the world and not let any good be lost”.

It is important to recognize and respect the emphasis our ancestors put on knowledge and wisdom, not only as a key condition of a good world, but also one indispensable to actually achieving a good world. Important also is the balance between spiritual/psychological needs and material needs—the body or needs of good health is framed as the end of fears of various kinds, especially of death and disease and material well-being is described as the end of poverty, misery and devastating loss. Beautiful too is the idea of our need to “love doing good”, especially for the needy, the *alaini*, literally the “have nots”. Thus, love of doing good takes us beyond doing things simply as a burdensome obligation or reluctant responsibility. And it tells us that it is the love of doing good that makes our giving and doing good exceptionally good. Indeed, we all know people who give with a negative attitude or spirit and therefore undermine and negate the good, and make us want to refuse the gift or good given or return it.

Also essential here is the constant stress on the need for sacrifice—a giving of things valued, giving our heart and mind to the struggle to bring good in the world; our time and efforts; our material goods; and ultimately when we feel right about it, the *wholeness of ourselves*. Beautiful also is the concept of struggling, not only to increase good in the world, but also to “not let any good be lost”. Indeed, we are taught to hold on to that which is of value and keep it safe.

So, we give of ourselves in the good works we do and the struggle we wage to bring, increase and sustain good in the world. And we are not to limit good doing to our immediate family or even only to our community. For Odu 124:2 says, “those who restrict goodness in their house will never obtain goodness on the outside”. Indeed, Odu 166:2 says, “doing good worldwide is the best example of character”. Anticipating the sense sometimes experienced that people don’t or won’t appreciate the good being done for them, the Odu reminds us that no good is actually lost. Thus, it continues saying we give good so that the recipients might nurture, care for and share with others. But the sacred text teaches us that even though Ofun, the giving one, does good all over the world, “a part of the world will not thank him/her for their kindness and others will not even recognize its value”.

And yet, our sacred text teaches us, even as a father and mother “cannot help but give and do good things for their children”, so the giving one, the conscious and committed one is compelled to do good in and for the world, regardless. Here, the ancestors teach that we should practice sacrifice, i.e., give ourselves totally to the doing of good in and for the world “so that all the good things which we give to the people, if they are wasted by the world, they still return to us in the righteous order of things”. For indeed, we in doing good are building the moral community and good world we all want and deserve and long to leave for the bold and beautiful ones who will come after us and continue our shared ethical obligation to constantly repair, renew and remake the world.

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