



**HARRIET TUBMAN AT THE CROSSROADS:
LESSONS OF LIFE AND STRUGGLE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

This 2013 March 10 marks the 100th anniversary of the passing and ascendance of Harriet Tubman, legendary freedom fighter and emancipator, all-seasons soldier, lifter-up of the light that lasts, and audacious opener of the ways forward in life and struggle for the liberation for our people. And thus, we pause to pay rightful homage to her, raise her name in grateful remembrance and in the highest respect, and reflect deeply on the lessons of life and struggle she left for us to embrace and emulate. To think of Harriet Tubman is to be confronted with the instructive and uplifting image of her standing at the crossroads of freedom and enslavement; of life and death; facing decisions of staying put and hoping or stepping forward and hurrying the dawn of the day of freedom; of self-consciously risking her life to be free or letting her life be destroyed daily without resistance from her or mercy from her enslaver; and of individual escape or collective liberation with and through community.

In a real and relevant sense, we are always and ever standing at the crossroads of history and everyday life with our foremother Harriet Tubman, especially in this time of crisis, chaos, confusion and needless suffering and thus a time of constant testing. That is to say, we stand with the model, memory and spirit of her in times and places of major and minor decisions and at critical junctures of life and struggle where the choices we make will shape and often determine the course and content of our personal and collective history and daily lives.

Harriet Tubman, and this is a first lesson, does not come into being by herself. She emerges from an ancient tradition of a strong, morally and spiritually grounded, caring, and struggle-committed people. Her father and mother are resistant to enslavement, teach her freedom, and are part of the free and enslaved African American community which builds networks of passage to freedom which she used. And she draws strength from her Ashanti culture, and spirituality and the will to resist from women preachers and teachers of freedom such as Maria Stewart, Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee and Zilpha Elaw, as well as the men and women of the AME church and the abolitionist movement.

The *Odu Ifa* says, "If you are given birth, you must bring yourself into being again." And Tubman did just that. Her listening and learning well from her father and mother; her caring for her little brother; her refusing to hold a fellow enslaved man down even when ordered; her resistance to letting Whites teach her to pray or how to worship and her standing up and freeing herself were all creative and transformative acts that shaped and strengthened her ability to bring herself into being as a woman of great worth and heavy weight in the scales of history. This too is a lesson: day by day we construct and commit ourselves to be weak or strong, capable or unable, and to fail or flourish by what we do or do not do in our daily acts of good or less than good, caring or coldness, loving and listening or hating and harming.

Tubman teaches us also to reflect carefully on the seriousness of our situation and the map we make for moving forward.

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She said of her determination to fight for freedom, “I had reasoned that out in my mind.” She had decided to fight to the finish, to “go free or die” fighting without fear, reservation or regret. And in any case, she declared with dignity and defiant determination, “I should fight for my liberty as long as my strength lasts”. Given her deep spirituality and concept of being God-guided, she understands struggle for good and freedom in the world as an essential way of worship and being in the world.

Harriet Tubman was a woman of faith (*imani*), work (*kazi*) and struggle (*jitihada*). She believed in the Transcendent, a God whose divine intention was freedom for her, Black people and all humankind. And she gave her life, material resources and relentless efforts to achieve this. She said, “God was always near. He gave me strength and set the North Star in the heavens. He meant for me to be free.” And she believed in her people, in their commitment, capacity and courage to achieve the freedom and justice due them.

In the spirit of Harriet Tubman, then, and of the ancient and ongoing African tradition that grounded and nurtured her, we must in these critical times have faith in the Transcendent and our people which yields a purpose (*nia*) inclusive of and also beyond our individual selves and our families; a purpose that concerns itself also with the needs and aspirations of our people, the radical transformation of this country and the sustainable well-being of the world. Like our foremother, Harriet Tubman, *we too must find our North Star, a steadfast point of orientation* that locates us first at the center of our own history and culture, builds on its best ideas and practices, and leads us toward the unfinished work and ongoing struggle left to us by our ancestors. And this is: “to bear witness to truth and set the scales of justice in their proper place, (especially) among those who have no voice” and increase and sustain the Good in and of the world.

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