



**THE ETHICS OF EDUCATION:  
GROUNDING OUR TEACHING, LEARNING AND LIFE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

The struggle we wage all over this country for the relevant and rightful education of our children and people as a whole is at the center of our struggle for social justice, an ongoing struggle for access and opportunity, conditions and capacities for a decent living and a good life, and a rightfully expected worthy and foreseeable future for those who will come after us. Thus, to actively advocate that local, state and national educational and political authorities pay rightful attention to the educational conditions and capacities of Black children in an adequate and equitable way is not to ask for favor, social privilege, or ethnic advantage.

On the contrary, it is to demand respect for the human right to know and to struggle for an opportunity and acquisition of knowledge that determines life chances and opens promising ways to the future. It is also to struggle against “bad business as usual” which literally locks Black students down deep in the hole and history of structured illiteracy and oppression which takes a terrible toll on their lives and ours.

The issue of education, then, is at heart an ethical issue, for at its most essential level, it is about *life*, about how we define and value real, live human beings and respect their right to know, in a word, their right to gain the knowledge necessary to understand the world and themselves, and assert themselves successfully in making a living and living a good and meaningful life. Our ancestors of ancient Egypt understood education as the teaching and learning of life, grasping and being grounded in its principles, precepts and practice. The word for education in ancient Egyptian is *Sebait*,

which also means instruction, teaching, rightful guidance, learning and the discipline required to achieve its life-affirming and life-enhancing goals.

Thus, Seba Maat (the moral teacher) Amenomope says, in the *Husia* at the beginning of his book of teachings (Sebait), that his is “a teaching for life.” It is, he states, “instructions for well-being, to direct one rightfully on the path of life, to cause one to flourish on earth, to steer clear of evil, to save one from the mouth of the multitude, and cause one to be praised in the speech of the people.” Here education is an ethical project both in conception and execution, directed toward moral grounding, social competence, and human well-being and flourishing.

The ancient Egyptians made knowing central to what it means to be human. Indeed, the word for human being was *rekhyt* which means *knowing being*. It is the same designation given to humans later in science when they were called “homo sapiens,” i.e., “knowing man.” Implied in this designation of “knowing beings” is not only that we know in ways and on levels other animals do not, but also that our knowing is self-constituting and transformative of ourselves and the world.

In other words, the very practice and process of learning is a fundamental way humans bring themselves into being, make themselves, transform themselves into what they will and wish to become and acquire the capacity to transform the world around them. Thus, there is an emphasis on the moral and human right and ethical responsibility to learn, to know and to use our knowledge in ways that enhance our lives

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and cause us and others to flourish. And it is within this understanding that it is criminal to deny people the right, conditions and capacity to learn and know.

Indeed, one of the fundamental ways oppressors have used to deculturalize, disable and cause the social death of a people is to deny them the right to know, to outlaw their language and learning, erase their minds and memory, and substitute them with dignity-denying and spirit-killing information from the oppressor's own culture, as was done during the Holocaust of enslavement. Thus, the first responsibility of a liberation movement is to educate the people, to repair and restore their historical memory, teach them a language and logic of liberation, and join them in the emancipatory work and struggle to expand their understanding of themselves and their capacity to free themselves and push their lives forward.

An education for life, the *Husia* teaches us, is first of all an education that respects the special status of the student as a bearer of dignity and divinity, worthy of the highest respect. This means respect for the student's person, culture and capacity to learn and their right and responsibility to learn with dedication, discipline, passion and pleasure. Therefore, the sacred texts say, "You must give yourself whole-heartedly to learning. (For) Nothing is more valuable than gaining knowledge. Love learning. Let its goodness enter your mind. Your days in school will be valuable to you and their benefit will last for an eternity."

Secondly, an education for life, the sacred texts tell us, is about cultivating, nourishing and disciplining the heart and mind.

In ancient Egyptian, the word *ib* means heart and mind, joining both capacity to know and reason with the ability to feel and be respectfully sensitive to others and the world. The educational goal, then, is not only to expand our intellectual consciousness, but also our moral conscience. In a word, it is to create not only an excellent mind, but also a beautiful character. As the *Husia* says, "Examine every matter so that you may understand it. And be gentle and patient so that your heart and mind may be beautiful and excellent. For it is in the development of character that education succeeds."

Thirdly, our ancestors strived to cultivate not simply brilliant bureaucrats and moneyed men and women, but socially responsible persons. These educated persons, thus, declared in their autobiographies that they understood and defined themselves by doing good (*Maat*) in their families, cities and society. They said, "I have come from my city. I have descended from my district. I did *Maat* there. I spoke truth, did justice, fed the hungry, clothed the naked and brought the boatless to dry land." And "My whole town is my witness."

This teaching anticipates W.E.B. DuBois' stress on an education that did not simply make money-makers, but cultivated socially responsible and competent men and women, and that teaches us not simply how to make a living, but also how to imagine and make a life, a life worthy of the name African and human in the most ethical and expansive sense. And it prefigures Mary McLeod Bethune's ethical call to the educated to dare discover the dawn and share its life-giving light and promise with our children and the masses who need it most.

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