



BRINGING FORTH THE FIRE WITHIN US: WEATHERING THE WORST OF WINTERS

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

TO MEET ANY AND EVERY CHALLENGE IN life, we must *anchor* and *equip* ourselves, holding firmly to that which endures in the midst of that which is overthrown and passes away, and self-consciously and constantly preparing and provisioning ourselves for dealing with that which we must confront and achieve, resolve or overcome. We are now confronted with a very deadly, disruptive and destructive pandemic caused by the coronavirus, Covid-19, and aggravated by denials, delays, confusion, pettiness and gross incompetence at the highest level. And it will take all our inward and outward strength, as persons and a people, to weather this winter of destabilizing shock, devastating storm and stomach-turning stress and strain.

This challenge is clearly unique, but we have weathered the worst of winters in our history, from the Holocaust of enslavement through the White supremacist savagery of segregation and its killing fields and swamps, its legalized and socially sanctioned lynching. *And we are not undone, defeated or inclined to pursue an unjust peace.* Thus, our conversations and thoughts must not degenerate into death and doom talk. Rather, we must choose life and protect and promote it. And surely ours is a history of a liberation struggle which has been a model and mirror for peoples in oppression and resistance in this country and around the world. And we must resist narrow notions of who we are and what we can do and what is possible, even in the most limited and limiting spaces. Indeed, as our honored teacher, Nannie Helen Burroughs, taught us, our history offers ample evidence that “We specialize in the wholly impossible.”

Reflecting on the challenge before us, I am drawn to the word for “challenge” in Swahili, *changamoto*. The word is a combination of two words—*moto* (fire) and *changa* which has several meanings, but is here interpreted as both to collect and to contribute. Thus, it literally means both to collect and contribute fire, a gathering and giving of fire, interpreting fire here as vital

and transformative energy and focused and determined agency. The lesson here is that to meet every challenge, we must gather together the fire within us, that vital and transformative energy by which we transform ourselves and the world. And we must contribute this fire; share it and link it to the transformative fire of others in the cooperative creation of good in our lives and the world. To weather this terrible winter, then, we must cultivate and stoke the fire within us, reach deep inside ourselves and bring forth that vital and transformative energy; the passion, enthusiasm and eagerness to live, to be well, to serve, to struggle, to overcome, do good and flourish in the world, as our honored fire prophet and teacher, Min. Malcolm X taught, lived and left as an enduring legacy.

This transformative fire is spoken of in the *Odu Ifa* (11:1), sacred text of our ancient Yoruba ancestors, who taught that “Wherever fire emerges, it makes a way for itself. They said its head will clear a way for it.” We are, then, taught to be like fire, to let our head and heart imagine a way forward and then with passion and persistence and enthusiastic striving and sacrifice bring it into being. Here *sacrifice* becomes central. Therefore, the sacred text goes on to say, “Anyone who wants to achieve anything should practice sacrifice so that a way can be opened for them, as it is opened for fire.” Here the sacred text teaches that it is through the fire of sacrifice, the dedicated, disciplined and eager giving of self to the task before us that a way is opened for us. Thus, it concludes “If a person practices sacrifice, anything they wish to accomplish, whether it is work or some other important thing, that thing can be done.”

Surely, this is a time of sacrifice, and by sacrifice I mean here the giving of our heart and mind, our time, our efforts, our material goods and the wholeness of ourselves in a righteous cause. And at this historical moment especially, it is in the cause of saving lives, our own, our loved ones and others, maintaining and restoring health, keeping safe, expanding hope and ulti-

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mately leaving lockdown to move freely again and to continue to live our lives, do our work, and wage our struggle in ways we are so familiar with and long to engage in again.

At the heart and soul of this essential fire and sacrifice in the interest of our health as a wholistic condition and capacity must be the answering of the great and growing need for quality relations and thus the ongoing struggle to keep our relationships strong, to build new ones and aid in cultivating contexts and networks in which others can reach out and embrace, uplift and support each other. In a word, we must not let this time of necessary physical distancing lead to an increased relational distancing, but rather to an increase in our relational closeness. The *Nguzo Saba* (The Seven Principles) offer us a foundation and overarching framework for increasing our relational closeness, meeting this current challenge and continuing our struggle to expand the realm of human health and justice and other good in the world.

In the context of increasing physical and relational distancing, the principle of *Umoja* (unity) teaches us the oneness, interrelatedness and interdependence of our people, the common ground of our humanity, and our obligation to ourselves, others and the well-being of the world and all in it. In a world and time of brazen denials and violations of the rights of all peoples to freedom to control their destiny and daily lives, the principle of *Kujichagulia* (self-determination) reaffirms that each people and culture is a unique and equally valid and valuable way of being human in the world and they have the right and responsibility to be themselves and free themselves and make their own unique cultural contribution to good in the world.

In the midst of isolated and isolating concepts of human health, human life and human good, the principle of *Ujima* (collective work and responsibility) teaches that the greatest good is shared good, that shared goods like freedom and justice are indivisible and we must build

together the good communities, societies and world we want and deserve to live in. In this time of the great and growing challenge of distributive justice, the principle of *Ujamaa* (cooperative economics) upholds the values of shared work and shared wealth and the right of all to an equitable and just share of goods of the world, supports health workers and other workers' rights to just wages, safe and healthy conditions of work and adequate benefits and to strike and struggle to achieve them. And it urges defense of the earth against plunder, pollution and depletion.

At this critical moment in which things could turn into just holding up, waiting, watching and hoping something doesn't happen we can't handle, the principle of *Nia* (purpose) reminds us of the sacred teachings of our ancestors which say, "Let's do things with joy. For surely humans have been divinely chosen to bring good in the world" (Odu Ifa, 78:1), and this is the fundamental mission and meaning of human life. Moreover, in a world where lives are regularly destroyed and needlessly lost, where vulnerable peoples are savaged and suppressed and their lands brutally occupied, the principle of *Kuumba* (creativity) raises up and reaffirms the ancient African ethical imperative of *serudj ta*, to repair, renew and remake the world, making it more beautiful and beneficial than we inherited it.

AND FINALLY, IN A WORLD AND TIME when the sense of hopelessness and helplessness can more easily take hold and paralyze, the principle of *Imani* (faith) encourages us to hold fast to the active and transformative faith of our forefathers and foremothers who believed in the sacred and Transcendent and honored it; believed in our people's capacity for and commitment to good; refused to be defeated, dispirited and diverted; and who taught us in word and deed, dignity-affirming, upright and elevated ways to understand and assert ourselves in the world. ▲

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