



**HISTORY, HERITAGE & SELF-FORGETFULNESS:
RENEWING MEMORY AND CONTINUING STRUGGLE**

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It is in these months of February and March, designated as Black History Month I (General Focus) and Black History Month II (Women Focus) that we have set aside time and space to celebrate ourselves *in* history and *as* history. For we are producers and products of this sacred narrative, and the subject and center of this the most ancient of human histories. In this sacred narrative which we tell and teach as African history, we speak poetry and prophecy, talking of things to come and of things that are holy, that heal and lead to health and wholeness of humanity and the world. And we seek and speak truth, do and demand justice, and struggle constantly to have our lives unfold and flourish as a worthy and seamless whole. For in this sacred narrative, it is written that we are “divinely chosen to bring good in the world,” and that we are to lift up the light that lasts and illuminates the way, and expands the boundaries and increases the possibilities of being and daring good in the world.

To say we are chosen by heaven and history to bring good in the world means we are to understand and assert ourselves as a moral and social vanguard whose work and struggle, moral vision and vocabulary have become a model and mirror of human struggle for liberation in the world. This is the meaning and central message of Dr. Martin Luther King’s teaching that we must always struggle and work for ourselves, history and humanity in such a way that “when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say ‘there lived a great people—a Black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.’ This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility.”

U.S. society is by all standards standing at the edge of crisis. It is an impending crisis defined by a declining economy, self-entrapment in an immoral and unwinnable war, diminished status and respect even among allies, millions homeless and without health care, unresolved race and class injustice and inequities, and a leadership lacking intellectual insight, moral grounding and the right to govern by any rational and ethical standard. It is in times like these that we as a people have in the past emerged to pose a fundamental challenge and hope for society, a way out of the moral and social morass in which it has sunk itself.

Even when society is unaware of it or sees it and then denies it due to regular bouts of racial irrationality, it still finds itself turning towards the voice of change and challenge coming from within our people. It is thus, no accident that a Black man, regardless of how society seeks to redefine him to better accept him, who has emerged at this critical time in U.S. life as a major figure in society’s quest for national redemption and renewal. At the beginning of his quest for national leadership, before his White advisors counseled ethnic self-concealment, Barack Obama paid homage to the central source of his moral grounding, the ancient and ongoing spiritual and ethical tradition of his community, especially its social justice tradition and its righteous and rightful struggle for shared good in the world. It is this tradition and the moral vision and moral vocabulary that it provides that remains his bedrock and beginning, regardless of the twists, turns and transformations his advisors and urgencies of politics force on him.

This emergence of national moral leadership from among us in times of crisis is a recurrent historical process reminiscent of

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the time of Dr. King and the Black Freedom Movement with obvious differences, especially the difference between a campaign for office promising change and a social movement making and compelling change. The point is that Dr. King and the civil rights phase of the Movement challenged the country to change, move from oppression to freedom, repent its racist savagery and redeem and remake itself. And it was the Black Freedom Movement as a whole that gave people a sense of hope and possibility, and allowed White youth to participate in something more uplifting than lording over others and pretending a superiority, specious in its claim, irrational in its assumptions and grossly immoral in its conception and conduct. Thus, it has been our role as a moral and social vanguard in this country to challenge U.S. society, not only to live up to its best founding ideas and documents as did Dr. King, but also to go beyond them as Min. Malcolm urged, and imagine a new way of being human in the world. Indeed, thru our struggles and the struggles of others, we have expanded the realm of freedom and changed society in ways the “founding fathers” could neither imagine nor accept. So, we must not lose sight of our larger role, regardless of the sense of hope and happiness a single campaign brings us.

Moreover, in this constant search to redeem and renew itself without substantive change, society stands ready to seize new initiatives and co-opt them for its own.

Thus, it will support campaigns which offer self-congratulatory images and ideas of itself while providing little more than promises as progress, symbols as substance, selected Black presence in high places as evidence of social change and achievement, and shared hope for a new society as grounds for coming together instead of the shared wealth, power and status required.

Likewise, it will, if we let it, even redefine and rename Black History Month—Black Heritage Month—in order to freeze-frame it and reduce it to memory-dulling-and-deforming ceremonies, and celebratory gestures and references ripped from their context and stripped of their essential and emboldening lessons of life and struggle. For to talk of heritage is to speak of things handed down and to be essentially honored with ceremony and respectful silence. But to talk of history is not only to remember in rightful respect, but also to learn its lessons, absorb its spirit of possibility, and emulate its models of human excellence, achievement and struggle.

It is important then that we understand our history in its wholeness as both memory and movement, record and struggle, and that we appreciate in practice its role as a wall of resistance against our self-forgetfulness and passivity, eking out an inauthentic existence as a mere darker and deformed reflection of the dominant race, rather than reflecting the rich, varied, ancient and ongoing reality of our own culture and history.