



**JOHN CALDWELL, STORM RIDER:  
ESSENTIAL NOTES FROM A EULOGY**

*Los Angeles Sentinel, 06-07-12, p.A7*

**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**S**urely, as it is written in the sacred texts of our ancestors, the *Husia*, “to do that which is of value is for eternity. A person called forth by his work does not die for his name is raised and remembered because of it.” And so it is with this man of immeasurable meaning to us all, our beloved brother and attorney for our people, John Morgan Caldwell, Jr. Thus, we have come to this sacred place to bear witness to his great weight and worth in the world, and to speak and hear of the limitless value and varied kinds of good he brought and left in our lives and the world.

The passing and journey into eternity of John Caldwell offers us an important opportunity and time to pause and pay rightful homage to one most worthy among us, and to think deeply about the rich harvest of lessons we can glean from his life and use to understand, enrich and expand our own. Beautiful and boundless are the things we can say in honor and loving memory of John. For he was a noble son of his parents, a beloved brother of his siblings and associates, a committed advocate and servant of his people, a cherished friend of all so honored, and an invaluable and irreplaceable resource, keeper and teacher of our history and culture.

John was above all one who loved our people, cherished our culture, and saw the two intertwined and inseparably linked. He wanted us to value the rich, ancient, ongoing gifts we have given the world—from the ancient architectural wonders of the world and sacred wisdom of ancient Egypt to the current and continuing creativity of extraordinary and ordinary people of Leimert Park and throughout the world

African community. Indeed, these gifts extend from the limitless libraries of literature and monuments of music, scientific achievements and spiritual and ethical insights to our critical struggles for human freedom and flourishing in the world.

John saw Leimert Park as the center and heartbeat of African American culture in L.A. and opened his law office there, became a powerful presence and consistent servant of the people, represented the Leimert Park Merchants Association, and was a vital part of the leadership and development of the community. He also practiced an ethics of service, taking an enormous number of pro bono cases and many others for reduced rates. And he gave planned and unplanned lectures and talks on the meaning and measure of Black culture wherever and whenever he decided it was good. He wanted us to know and enjoy our culture, engage and love each other, and understand, sing and celebrate ourselves in good and beautiful ways.

John agreed with Mary McLeod Bethune that “we are heirs and custodians of a great legacy” and must bear the burden and glory of that legacy with strength, dignity and determination. He agreed too with August Wilson that “there is no idea that cannot be contained in Black life” or expressed in Black culture and that our culture must be defended and be the foundation for the special truth we speak to the world. And John agreed also with Kawaida philosophy that the defining feature of a people is its culture, that to be itself, free itself and flourish, a people must be self-consciously grounded in its own culture, respect it, live it and build

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institutions and defend spaces in which it can grow and constantly enrich and expand itself.

This defense of our critical cultural and political space led John to be active in the New Frontier Democratic Club leadership. He was constantly concerned with shaping policy that affected our people and ensuring our adequate and effective representation in these times of change. And John was concerned that our leadership be at its best, and that meant that leadership be conceived and carried out as a moral vocation in the interest of our people and humanity as a whole. In this, he embraced the classic leadership models of Martin Luther King, Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X and Ella Baker—whose faith in and commitment to the people were clear and unshakeable.

John was also committed to access, excellence and an enriching experience in education for African Americans and other students of color. He saw, as we all do, the vital and indispensable role our young people must play in defining, defending and promoting the interests of our people, forging a future worthy of the name and history African. Like Malcolm, he knew that “education is a passport to the future.” When we met and worked together with the UCLA students to resist attacks on affirmative action at the African American Cultural Center (Us), we talked at length about our role as alumni and activist intellectuals in mentoring, advising and struggling in unity with students to ensure real access, cultural grounding, academic excellence and the cultivation of commitment to community. And he worked hard to cultivate the

consciousness, capacity and commitment they need to achieve this.

In our last meeting at the hospital, we talked of Howard Thurman, whom he respected greatly and read regularly and of an article I had written on Thurman’s concept of riding the storm. This reading and reinforcement was important to John. For in the closing years of his life, his illness had taken a terrible toll on his body and will to live. But when family and friends, including me, reminded him of the resilience and resourcefulness he, himself, had praised in our people, he picked himself up off the ground of despair, stood up, and returned to fight courageously to the end. He had done what Thurman called “ridden the storm and remained intact.” As Thurman wrote, “It is good to know what there is in us that is strong and solidly rooted. It is good to have the assurance that can only come from having ridden the storm and remained intact.”

John Caldwell had regained and held onto his best conception of himself, a goodness for which there is no substitute. And thus, he left this world as he knew himself and wanted us to remember him: storm-rider, still-intact, warrior who would not walk away from the battlefield for a better world and who, as Gwen Brooks said, “conducted his blooming in the noise and whip of the whirlwind.” For this model of life and living, as the *Husia* says, “he shall be honored among the ancestors; his name shall endure as a monument; and what he has done on earth shall never perish or pass away.”

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