



**KING, MEMPHIS AND THE MORALITY OF SACRIFICE:  
DANGEROUS UNSELFISHNESS AND RIGHTEOUS STRUGGLE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**I**N THIS MONTH, WE RIGHTLY TURN TOWARD Memphis and the martyrdom of Dr. Martin Luther King and again towards the enduring message and meaning of his life. Indeed, we turn to Memphis because it is the site of the martyrdom of Dr. King, one of the tallest trees in our forest of freedom fighters and a constant reminder we must continue the struggle and keep the faith. And we turn to Memphis because it is a microcosm, mirror and reminder of conditions we still must change in this country and the world, and of the work we must do and the struggle we must wage and win to accomplish this.

Martin and Memphis are essential and instructive parts of our history as a people, as an African people, as African Americans. And to understand Dr. King and the city that became the site of his ultimate sacrifice and assassination, we must always place King in the context of his people and in the context of the history, culture and the Black Freedom Struggle of his people that called him into being. It is his people's ancient and ongoing social justice tradition he embraced and in which he grounds himself and it is a tradition which makes morally imperative *witness to truth, service to the people and self-conscious sacrifice in the ongoing righteous and relentless struggle to bring and sustain good in the world.*

The message of Dr. King's life and his teachings, like all great messages of the world, are both particular and universal. They are particular in that they rise out of and speak first to a particular people, but it also universal in that it speaks to universal principles and practices which resonate with other peoples of the world, for it speaks to the best of what it means to be African and human in the world. It is good we gather to remember, raise up and pay rightful homage to Dr. King on April 4<sup>th</sup>, his Day of Sacrifice. We say Day of Sacrifice here rather than ,day of assassination, not because we don't acknowledge he was assassinated. But we want to shift the emphasis from assassination, which

is what his enemies and the enemies of human freedom and justice did, to *sacrifice* which is what Dr. King did. That is to say, he refused to back down, surrender or be seduced by the system, but rather put his life on the line, demonstrating what he called on us to practice, i.e., *a dangerous unselfishness.*

In his prophetic speech in Memphis, his last message to his people, the country and the world, he marked out paths we must follow if we are to be successful in our righteous and relentless struggle for freedom, justice, equality, civil rights, and rightful recognition and respect as persons and a people. Thus, he left us lessons of life and struggle we, in rightfully paying homage to his life, struggle and awesome sacrifice, should raise up, reflect on and put into practice.

First, King, an astute reader of the signs of history, asked us to read those same signs and see the time we live in as a gift and good, a time for test and righteous and relentless struggle. He said he was glad to live in this great time of turning in human history when the struggle and cry everywhere is for freedom, justice, and recognition and respect of humans and human rights. "Something is happening in the world" he said, "The masses of people are rising". And we are and must continue to be a powerful and assertive part of this revolution in the struggle for human rights and freedom.

Secondly, Dr. King tells us that if we are to honor the invitation of history that is offered us, "it means we've got to stay together and maintain unity". And that unity must be an active operational unity in the interests and advancement of our people. We can have coalitions and alliances with others, but without unity ourselves, we don't enter the battlefield or meeting room from a position of power rooted in the unified strength of our people.

Thirdly, King tells us "we must keep the issues where they are", i.e., clear and in the forefront and not let others divert us or decide the focus of our struggle. He states that "The issue is

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injustice” and justice, the need for racial, social and economic justice. It is a justice that is sensitive to and actively strives to end suffering, hunger, homelessness, lack of healthcare, police violence, mass and unjust incarceration, and undeserved and needless deaths of all kinds.

King also tells us we must audaciously challenge America to live up to its best ideals and even go beyond them in the interest of a wider and more inclusive concept of freedom, justice and equity. And “we’ve got to say to the nation”, he says, “It will be resolved”; and we will overcome, regardless of unjust and irrational resistance. For he says, “when people get caught up with that which is right and they are willing to sacrifice for it, there is no stopping point short of victory”. Indeed, he says, these people, as history has taught, have “a certain kind of fire that no water can put out”; a fire of freedom, justice and the constant quest for good in and for the world.

Certainly, giving this speech in the midst of the Black sanitation workers’ strike and struggle in Memphis in 1968, King speaks of the need for economic power through economic withdrawal, economic discipline, institution-building and support, pooling resources and supporting workers in their rightful struggle for fair treatment, a living wage, safe and just working conditions, and the right to unionize.

Dr. King also calls on us to support and maintain a “relevant ministry”, a body of preachers and priests that are deeply rooted in our social justice tradition, not in a gospel of prosperity; a gospel that “deals with the problems of the poor”; refers repeatedly to heaven, but is self-consciously engaged with issues of earth. He wants to reaffirm the faith tradition

that brings good news to the poor, proclaims freedom for the prisoner and oppressed, and care and empowerment of the vulnerable.

Furthermore, King tells us, we must develop a morality of sacrifice, a “dangerous unselfishness” which asks the question not what will happen to me if I act to help persons in need and vulnerable, but rather what will happen to them if I don’t? He says, “We’ve got to give ourselves to the struggle until the end...we’ve got to see it through” regardless of the costs. “Be concerned about your brother” and sister, he counsels. “You might not be on strike”, or fired or harassed or killed by police violence, but we are all affected. For freedom and justice are indivisible. And thus, he says, “we either go up together or go down”.

Dr. King ends his speech by giving thanks for being able to serve in his century, and expressing joy in witnessing students standing up for freedom and justice and Black people in Albany, Birmingham and elsewhere in defiant and righteous resistance; deciding to straighten their backs and actively resist, knowing that the oppressor “can’t ride your back unless it’s bent”.

**C**LOSING, HE REAFFIRMS HIS FAITH IN US AND prophesizes our ultimate victory and passing into a promise land, a land of freedom, justice, truth and righteousness that we have forged in righteous and relentless struggle. And thus he ends saying, “Let us rise up in greater readiness and let us stand up with greater determination. And let us move on in these powerful days of challenge to make America what it ought to be” and to remake the world. For as he said in his first speech to the Movement in Montgomery, “this is our task and overwhelming responsibility.

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