



**PAUL ROBESON'S MORAL IMPERATIVES:
STRIVING TO BE AFRICAN AND FREE**

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IF THERE IS ONE HARD AND COSTLY LESSON learned from history and the current and continuous police killing of our people and the depraved disregard for our lives and our right to life, freedom and security that this represents, it is that there is a fatal penalty to pay for our daring to be our Black selves and free our Black selves in America. But we rightfully continue to resist our brutal erasure and savage oppression. For there is no moral or meaningful alternative to this position and the righteous and relentless struggle we wage to achieve these twin and intertwined goals.

It is a fundamental concept and contention of Kawaida philosophy, a philosophy of life, work and struggle, that to free ourselves we must be ourselves, but that we can't fully be ourselves until we fully free ourselves. Thus, there is always the challenge to constantly expand the liberation struggle so that we can ultimately enjoy an authentic freedom and come into the fullness of ourselves. In this month of remembering, raising up and reflecting on the life and legacy of Paul Robeson (April 9, 1898-January 23, 1976), his two moral imperatives and constant striving and struggle to be African and to be free, easily and insistently comes to mind.

A consummate artist, an activist intellectual and a dedicated freedom fighter, Robeson placed great and continuing emphasis on his constant concern with being African. That is to say, being himself, rightfully representing his people, their artistic and intellectual culture, their history and humanity and their liberation struggle. Thus, he says that in life and "In my music, my plays, my films, I want to carry always this central idea: to be African."

He had reached back in the spirit and practice of *sankofa*, studying the ancient, rich and varied cultures of African peoples. And he made two foundational and life-changing discoveries. First, he came to realize he, himself, was an African, "a discovery which . . . influenced (his) life ever since." Second, as he studies African cultures and

languages, he realized that "along with the towering achievements of the cultures of ancient Greece and China, there stood the culture of Africa, unseen and denied by the imperialist looters of Africa's material wealth." And he spent the whole of his professional life, sharing its deep and enduring beauty, its rich variedness, and its elevating insights into being African and human in the world.

Speaking of the special uniqueness of Black people and their sacred soulfulness, Robeson raises up and praises the spiritual power of Black people. He states the "power of the spirit is the pride and glory of my people and there is no human quality in all of America that can surpass it." Moreover, he tells us "it is a force for good and there is no hatefulness about it." On the contrary, he continues, "It exalts the finest things in life – justice and equality, human dignity and fulfillment."

It is, he says, "deeply rooted" in the everyday earthiness of our lives, and yet it also "reaches up to the highest skies and mankind's noblest aspirations." As ever and always, speaking in a time of great striving and struggle, as we now and constantly confront, he concludes that "It is time for this spirit to be evoked and exemplified in all that we do, for it is a force mightier than all our enemies and will triumph over all their evil ways."

Like Anna Julia Cooper and Mary McLeod Bethune, who preceded him, and Martin King, and Malcolm X who followed him, Robeson loved and valued African Americans greatly and saw them as a moral and social vanguard in this country and the world. He stated that our struggle for freedom and justice "represents the decisive front in the struggle for democracy in our country" as well as for "the cause of peace and liberation in the world." And we must summon the invincible spirit within us and embrace the role history and heaven demand of us. It is the self-same role Mary McLeod Bethune raised up and reaffirmed for us in her classic teaching that "Our task

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is to remake the world. It is nothing less than this.”

Here, then, Robeson reaffirms the moral imperative of freedom and of the righteous and relentless struggle to achieve and secure it. He calls for an aware and organized people and a leadership with “a single-minded dedication to their people’s welfare,” a leadership that is independent and resistant to seduction and subordination by the oppressor or their allies. They must be, he says, “prepared to face the trials of battle.” And they “must rely on and be responsive to no other control than the will of the people.”

Calling for a real leadership that is “not only in terms of title and position but in reality,” he stresses again the principle of self-determination, *kujichagulia*, as a moral imperative. In this special moment of Black women rising, he stresses the need to recognize and respect the leadership, history and capacity of Black women to lead the way, as well as men. And he asks us as a people, but especially, I imagine, Black men, a centering and sustaining question: “who should know better than the children of Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth and Mary Church Terrell that womenfolk have led the way?” We are indeed the children of our foremothers and mothers who lifted up the light that lasts and lighted the way forward and upward in our liberation struggle. Thus, the key here is not to erase or reduce the relevance and role of Black men, but to recognize and respect the indispensable, increasing and expanding role of women in leadership, life and struggle.

In preparing us for the long, difficult, dangerous and demanding road to freedom, Robeson reminds and assures us that “Freedom is a hard-bought thing and millions are in chains, but they strain toward the new day dawning near.” Thus, he calls for us to take that irreversible stand for

freedom, justice and other goods in the world. For in the struggle for liberation and against oppression, “everyone must decide where they stand and act accordingly.” In such an essential and life-and-death determining struggle, “there is no standing above the conflict. There are no impartial observers.” For indeed, “The battlefield is everywhere; there is no sheltered rear.” And Robeson knows as Frantz Fanon would later tell us, “an authentic national liberation exists only to the precise degree to which the individual has irreversibly begun his own liberation.”

Robeson tells us that in our struggle to be ourselves and free ourselves, we are well within our rights, our human rights. He says, “We ask for nothing that is not ours by right, and herein lies the great moral power of our demand.” And thus he teaches that we must not let our oppressors, allies or leaders cool and calm us down, negotiate away our urgent needs and interests, our rights and rightful demands. On the contrary, we must continue and intensify our struggle and never accept or allow anything that would deny our dignity or reduce or relinquish our rights.

THESE ARE IN ROBESON’S THOUGHTFUL instructions and advice a continuing sense of faith in our people and hope for the future and the ultimate and impending victory of our struggle, if we dare to struggle and dare to win. Thus, he says, “to be free – to walk the good American earth as equal citizens, to live without fear, to enjoy the fruits of our toil, to give our children every opportunity in life . . . , that dream which we’ve held so long in our hearts is today the destiny we hold in our hands.” And as we say so often in Kwanzaa, we must audaciously and radically imagine that destiny, that unfolding future, and forge it in the most ethical, effective and expansive ways. ▲

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