



**MALCOLM X:
ETERNAL MESSAGE, IMMORTAL MAN**
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It is written in the sacred *Husnia*, that “to do that which is of value is for eternity. A man called forth by his work does not die for his name is raised and remembered because of it.” Surely the imperishable character of Malcolm X and his meaning to us and the world lies unavoidably in his tireless and self-sacrificing work and struggle to transform himself, liberate his people and bring good into the world.

I had met Malcolm in the summer of '62 while I was a student at UCLA. We had brought him to campus. He and I talked at length after one of his lectures at Mosque #27 and at the Shabazz Restaurant and afterward he had given me a ride home. From that time until his martyrdom, we talked when he came to town. And in that time, I developed a profound respect for him as a leader, elder brother, incisive intellectual, and world historical person. He was a man among men and equally a man among women. And he was a man among the machines that masquerade as men, imitating and extracting our humanity in continuing and alternating bouts of racist insanity and planetary suicide. It is to these moneyed-machines that Malcolm spoke saying, “I’m the man you think you are. And if you want to know what I’d do for my freedom, think what you’d do for yours. I’ll do the same, only more of it.”

Malcolm’s life and his enduring lessons are about liberation on a personal, collective and world level. Thus, his teachings and practice are an ethical and spiritual project. As a project of liberation, it is a struggle which is both a process and promise of human freedom and human flourishing.

Malcolm’s religion was Islam, an earth-based practice with the promise of liberation first here on earth. In his days in the Nation of Islam, taught by Messenger Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm reminded us to understand that in a real sense “heaven and hell are conditions reflecting one’s moral and material conditions here on earth.” Given all that is to be done on earth to end suffering, free the oppressed, and bring justice in the world, “no one’s mind should be in the sky.” Indeed, he said, “in Islam everyone works. Heaven demands hard work. There is no room for laziness and no room for ignorance.”

Malcolm talks here about *jihad*, the internal and external struggle for self- and world transformation in the interest of freedom, justice and good in the world. Malcolm’s project has three basic dimensions to it, summed up in his call to “wake up, clean up and stand up.” The first dimension is a coming-into-consciousness which is a struggle against both ignorance and illusion cultivated by the dominant society. And it is equally a struggle for the acquisition of knowledge of: (1) self as a person and as a member of a world historical community and as a bearer of dignity and divinity; (2) God as a divine being, appearing in our own image and acting in our own interests; and (3) the oppressor as an enemy of human life, freedom and flourishing. Waking up precedes and makes possible each of the other steps. For Malcolm teaches, “when a man understand who he is, who God is, who the devil is...then he can pick himself up out of the gutter; he can clean himself up and stand up like a man should before his God.”

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To clean up is for Malcolm to live a moral life, speak truth, do justice, avoid all vices and addictions—chemical, behavioral or psychological, and constantly strive to do what is right and good for ourselves, our people and the world. Here it is important to note that Malcolm believed deeply in the possibility of self-transformation regardless of how low one has fallen. He notes that before his own transformation thru Islam, he “was addicted to and enslaved by the evils and vices of this white civilization—dope, alcohol, adultery and even murder.” He was, he said, locked at the bottom level of life “buried up to his neck in the mud of this filthy world with very little hope, desire or intention of amounting to anything.” Indeed, he says, he was so low and lost he was actually “walking on his own coffin.”

But as he recounts in his autobiography, Islam gave him a faith, a community and a cause that enabled him to lift himself up, overturn himself, and dedicate his life to lifting up others and living a life worthy of his human and divine nature. Here, then, is where his call to stand up is so essential, even indispensable and urgent.

Malcolm’s moral call and challenge to us to stand up speaks to each of our need and obligation to create the world we want and deserve to live in. Malcolm’s teaching on standing up, like his other ethical and spiritual teaching, are rooted in and reflective of his own personal recovery and reconstruction. For him, standing up is offering one’s life and death as a “testimony of some social value,” in a word, being willing to live and die as a mirror and martyr for liberation, freedom, justice and good in the world. It is a morality of sacrifice, he teaches here, a morality and self-giving in which we offer our hearts and minds, time, efforts, material goods and ultimately our life and even our death, if necessary, for a greater good.

Finally, it is important to remember that Malcolm asked us to understand and assert ourselves as we are, a world historical people, “part of a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter.” And thus for ourselves and humanity, we must imagine a new world and be the self-conscious fathers, mothers and midwives of history who with other struggling and progressive peoples bring it into being and make it flourish.

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