

Some Reminiscences of Malcolm X

Unblemished, Uncorrupted Leadership

by John Henrik Clarke

The following are excerpts from the remarks by Dr. John Henrik Clarke at the November 13 forum.

These are very critical times in our life as a people. Once more we are standing at the crossroads of history. And I have a great [feeling of] dilemma — that we are debating minor things and neglecting major subjects. I have not seen the film, and therefore I will have little to say about the film.

In my brief discussion with Spike Lee [...] I suggested that maybe the film should open when they threw the mangled body of Malcolm's father on the porch. And Malcolm as a kid, tugging at his mother's apron and asking, "What happened to father?" And his mother going slowly out of her mind.

Because that was the beginning of the making of the mind of Malcolm X. Because he began to deal with the contradiction in this nation. He had to go through a whole lot of other contradictions. People telling him what he could not be. Then the challenge within himself. And the question, "Why can't I be what other people are?"

I think one of the main reasons why at this juncture in history that a whole lot of phony people are gravitating toward the image of Malcolm X and a whole lot of sincere people are also gravitating toward that image, is that they sense something in Malcolm X that is needed not only by this people but by all people. Unblemished, uncorrupted, uncompromised leadership.

We've had so many hustlers disguised as leaders. So many peddlers of people. We keep looking back at Malcolm and keep examining him over and over again. What was the lesson that he taught? He taught a lesson around a subject that impinges on our minds now, and we are confused about how to grapple with that subject, and that subject is land and nation. Because land is the basis of nation.

You can talk all you want to about liberation. If you have no control over the land, you cannot solidify the nation. Zimbabwe is a good example. They came to pseudo independence with whites controlling most of the land and most of the food supply. That's not independence. That's programmed dependence.

Now why the gravitation toward Malcolm X? Haven't we gone through a battery of leaders? Haven't we examined them and [found them wanting]? What we miss in

looking at a Malcolm X is how Malcolm X related to the radical ministry of the past.

I knew Malcolm X from 1958, when we met, until two weeks before he was assassinated, and I talked with him consistently. I did not, even in the book that I compiled on Malcolm X, say very much about my relationship to him. So many phonies popped up after his death saying they were friends and pals of Malcolm X. I didn't want to be associated with these phonies. So I kept my relationship to myself. Most of it I have not written about to this day.

He was a man, one of the fastest learners that I have ever met in my life. You could give him information and he would read this information back to you, teaching you lessons over and above your instruction to him without offending you. He would speak to several audiences simultaneously using the same words without offending anyone in the audience. He could speak to the reader and the nonreader, to the college professor and the illiterate, simultaneously, and his message would get across to all of them.

What then is the significance of Malcolm X for today? He called not only for the restoration of nationhood, womanhood, manhood, he called for us to restore to our historical memory the time when we were not dependent on other people to make decisions for us. When we were the masters of our own destiny. He called on us to reconsider our position, not in the United States, but in the world.

The idea of an African American unity patterned after the Organization of African Unity started in the Saturday meetings after he broke with the Nation [of Islam]. He began to have these meetings at Old Flash Inn on McCombs Place on Saturday morning when the cafe had no customers. Out of these meetings came the structure and the idea for the Muslim Mosque, Inc., and the Organization of Afro-American Unity.

The constitution of the OAAU was fashioned in my livingroom. Charles Kenyatta, still alive, was there. Lynn Chipplet, now in northern California, was the secretary. My former wife was there. My mother-in-law, still alive, was there. So I'm not talking about ancient history or any kind of mystery. When we found matching phraseology in the Organization of African Unity, when we could

approximate their words in developing the constitution for the Organization of African American Unity, he was as happy as a child.

And it is little known that Malcolm X, and this is what made him so devastatingly effective, he had a non-Muslim "cabinet" that fed him information but never told him what to do or how to do it. Yet we made sure that the information he dispensed was always correct. No one told him what to do with the facts but they made sure that the facts were straight.

The most memorable thing for me in this regard is [one time when] he wanted something on history — because I was in his historical cabinet. His man picked it up at 7, he didn't get to read it until 9, and at 11 he debated four college professors on the Congo situation. He reduced them to crying children.

I gave him some newspaper clippings, some xeroxes of E.D. Morel's work on King Leopold's Congo, and I gave him a small book, tantamount to a goodsized pamphlet, by Mark Twain, King Leopold's Soliloquy, that had a lot of statistics about murder in the Congo. I told him an old trick that I used to play often when I was active in the left movement. When people are talking about something you don't know anything about, always switch the conversation to something you know about. [...] Malcolm played that trick on those college professors, and they were begging for mercy. That was Malcolm. Sharp in mind, sharp in information.

I'm going to talk briefly about some neglected aspects of his life and some misinterpretations, some misconceptions about some of the things he did. I do not think we have studied his growth, his evolution very well. I do not think that we have put the right emphasis on how he came out of the mire. [...]

I first met him in 1958 — he came to look at the Nation of Islam's exhibit at the World Trade Show building, the African Heritage Exposition. He saw someone hanging around me, a Hungarian girl, and he kept looking, and when she left, he came over and said, "That your woman?" I said, "No." He said, "Good. That's a dead-end street. I've been down that street." He went away, then he came over again, looked me up and down and said, "I bet you're a pork eater." I admitted that I visited the pork chop once in a while

and that I had been known to admire and to enjoy some chitlins. He suspected it. Throughout all our relationship he kept razzing me about being a pork eater, a swine eater. He said, "You're a decent human being. I'm gonna give you 99. Leave that swine alone, I'll give you 100." I stopped eating pork about fifteen years ago. It had nothing to do with religion at all; it had something to do with health. I wanted to live a little longer, and my high blood pressure just simply wouldn't take it.

Soon after this meeting he started a newspaper. He called it Mr. Muhammad Speaks. It later became *Muhammad Speaks*. And if you look at that first issue, if you're ever fortunate enough to get a rare thing like that, you'll find an article I wrote on the historical background of Nigeria. I told him how broke I was. I had been recently married for the second time, and the job market wasn't going too good. I was working at night at a bank and editing a magazine that paid me the magnificent sum of about \$70 a week. My wife was pregnant. Malcolm X paid me out of his own pocket, I found out years later. It wasn't the Nation's money; it was his own money.

The March on Washington

You see, he began to pull around him people who could advise him on the facts of the evolution and change in our movement. He was interested in every aspect of that movement. On the eve of the March on Washington [in 1963] he too was restless and asked for permission to participate in the march. Permission was not granted. This was part of the beginning of some difficulties [in the Nation of Islam]. When it was discovered that Elijah Muhammad's health wasn't too good, certain jealous rivalries began to develop within the Fruit of Islam, and among some other people, who were thinking he would be the natural head of the Nation in the absence of Elijah Muhammad. Certain forces began to move against him within the Nation.

He had become the spokesman for the Nation. He had given the Nation a national presence. And many times, when he was prefacing his speech with the words "The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches us," he, Malcolm X, was teaching lessons over and above anything the Honorable Elijah Muhammad ever thought about. Yet he was crediting Elijah Muhammad for his words. Because in Elijah Muhammad Malcolm X had found the lost father, the father that they threw on that porch — the Ku Klux Klan. He had again found a father image in his life. And he loved and respected Elijah Muhammad like a father and tried to communicate with him up until within a week of his death. Only to have his letters and his tapes intercepted. Elijah Muhammad would die without ever getting those last messages and that plea from Malcolm X for the two of them to get together and put that movement together again and heal the breach between them.

These are some of the things very few people know about, very few people write about.

Because Malcolm X knew the good that the Nation was doing, taking people out of prison, making them whole again, making them clean up themselves again, making them throw away old habits for new habits, teaching them respect for women again, teaching them responsibility again. And the movement of Elijah Muhammad was not stealing people from the little church or the big church, because they weren't in there. These were the people out there with no appreciable rallying point, with no appreciable leadership, who had found basic leadership.

[You have to understand] the good of the Nation of Islam, whether you believe in Islam or not. And that's not the issue I'm trying to get across here, because I don't believe in any form of organized religion. I believe in spirituality, and I believe in people. I believe in commitment. I believe in the worth of human beings. I believe in honor. I am an African nationalist and a Pan-Africanist. And if you ever gave me a proper definition of Marxism that would fit within my Pan-Africanism and my African nationalism, I would be a Marxist. But if it takes me out of there, then you can have it. Because we had the same thing, without dogma, without formulation, before Europeans wore shoes or lived in houses that had a window. We didn't have to go to Europe for that kind of thing anyway, for that kind of society.

What I'm trying to get at is that on the eve of the March on Washington, when he was not given permission to participate in that big arena — although in the final analysis it was a picnic on the grass that achieved absolutely nothing. [To him] it was symbolic that the other organizations were going there, participating. He wanted the right to do the same thing. And I think he would have had something meaningful to contribute to the March on Washington. It might have had substance with Malcolm X in it. Martin Luther King had a dream. Malcolm X would have had a plan. Soon after this, after the "chickens coming home to roost" speech [he was silenced]. And it really wasn't this speech. They wanted an excuse to get him out anyway, so they used this flimsy excuse. And when he saw that he wasn't going to be asked to come back into the Nation, he began to formulate ideas, organizational ideas, of his own. [He began] hurriedly, with such personnel and such support as he could get. Some were Muslims and some were non-Muslims. Some followed him out of the Nation, some rallied around him out of respect. [...] But he was moving fast.

Now when we go to Africa, the trip to North Africa was not as significant as the trip to West Africa. And yet the trip to West Africa is basically left out of the [Spike Lee] movie, so I've been told. There was an attempt to poison him in Egypt. This was no doubt because he did not know the warring factions

within Islam. In the name of Allah, there have always been warring factions within Islam, and still are, even now. He got trapped between these warring factions. Both of them wanted to control him.

When he went on the Hajj to Mecca, and when he wrote back that he saw black Muslims, white Muslims, brown Muslims worshipping together, that was an observation, not an analysis. Too many people think this means he was now an integrationalist. Soon after he arrived back here, he made clear he had not changed his ideas on race one iota — if you're trying to say that near the end of his life he became an integrationalist.

Martin Luther King

Well near the end of his life he met Martin Luther King. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X had the same basic objective, walking down different roads using different methodology. Martin Luther King's method would not succeed, because Martin Luther King was appealing to the conscience of the oppressor, not knowing that the oppressor had no conscience. It was idealistic, but it was totally impractical. Malcolm X said in simple direct words again and again, "The oppressor has no conscience. The oppressor has not accepted your manhood or your womanhood."

I think the most unfortunate thing of the many unfortunate things that happened to Malcolm X is that a bunch of political opportunists gained control over his speeches. [This is a reference to Pathfinder Press, the publishing house now influenced by the Jack Barnes leadership team of the SWP. Betty Shabazz, Malcolm's widow, gave Pathfinder exclusive rights to publish material by Malcolm.] They began to publish his speeches and interpret them, trying to prove that he was what they desired him to be.

Malcolm X is too big to fit into any kind of bowl. He's too big to fit into any bowl marked communism, socialism, or capitalism. He was a believer in the ultimate destiny of his people. Among his many revolutionary statements, his two last revolutionary statements [are the most important] — "Ballot or the Bullet" and "Message to the Grassroots". In both of them he dealt with political power and the land question as the basis of the nation.

Some will argue about who assassinated him and why. But Malcolm X learned something on his way home, [after] he arrived in Paris and was barred from entering — [after that] he knew that the plan to destroy him was not designed by his own people. He knew that the apparatus was bigger than anything controlled by his own people. And he became somewhat fatalistic. He knew that master murderers were out to get him and no matter whose hand pulled the trigger, that was not the planning and design of Black people.

Once you show your people the true face of power and what to do about it in this

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country, one of three things is going to happen to you. You're going to be driven into exile, driven into suicide, or you're going to be assassinated. Once your people understand the true face of power and know what to do about it, someone's going to have to give them some power, or they're going to take it. Once he began to teach that lesson he was writing his own obituary. The same thing is true of Martin Luther King in his speeches on the war in Vietnam.

When Malcolm X was assassinated I was

in Connecticut making a speech on great Africans in history. I was in the home of a Jewish family, having dinner before the speech. When they came in and told me they were as cold as ice, and someone said, "After all, he was anti-Semitic." I didn't know what to say. I wanted to hit somebody. I wanted to kick and scream. I went into that bathroom and cried like a child for fifteen minutes. I came out and made a fast speech later that day and came home.

But during that year after his death, after I had participated in the memorial for him, I

often felt that I was having a conversation with an old friend. And near the end of that year, sitting alone in my downstairs office, with the conversation going again, I asked figuratively, "Malcolm, what can I do?" And I felt that somewhere someone said, "Do your best work. In my memory and as a tribute to me, do your best work." I knew then that my best work was part of what he lived for and part of the reason he died. To tell the truth and suffer the consequences — that was my best work. □