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The Transformational Leadership of Malcolm X

by

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Mankind's history has proved from one era to another that the true criterion of leadership is spiritual. Men are attracted by spirit. By power, men are forced.

Malcolm X (AMX, 1992, p. 424).

The imposition of Western ontology has been particularly problematic for non-European people whose transforming cultural movements of the 1950s and the 1960s were "the essential litmus test[s] for the viability of American [social] democracy" (Marable, 1997, p. 21). While mainstream American culture may recognize the fact of these historical movements and honor a few well-known figures such as Rosa Parks and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., it also fails to honor the broad and complex assortment of people who forged these movements. While those few iconic figures are now taught in every American elementary school, those other important figures are typically left out. Or, for those who polemically challenged this society's racialized capitalist democracy, their contributions are distorted and reduced to caricatures (Cruse, 1984). Malcolm X (El Hajj Malik El Shabazz) was one such person who, through his own metamorphosis, analyses, social critique, activism, oratory, and "humanizing pedagogy" (Freire, 1970, p. 50), corroborated the educational thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of a significant number of oppressed people both in this nation and across the world (Carruthers, 1994; Clarke, 1994; Cruse, 1984; Gardner, 1995; Marable, 1995).

Transformational Leadership Legacy of Malcolm X

With bold protestations, organizational ability, and profound, incisive analyses of the 20th century United States, I believe that no other human

being has captured Pan-African minds with such enduring intensity as Malcolm X. He may well have been the single most significant African American world figure in the mid-to-late 20th century. And now in the 21st century he continues to be significant almost 40 years after his death. In times of crisis Malcolm X continues to lead from the grave.

According to Clarke:

Long range, I think if you understand Malcolm, and I'm not down-grading the other [leaders], I think Malcolm was the clearest, most direct, and said the most usable things of any leader in the 20th century. Malcolm X spoke directly to [the masses of Black people--the working class]. He didn't speak over or under [their heads] because he was one of them. (JHCI, 1995)

People believed and were drawn to Malcolm X (and still are today), but not out of some romantic attachment to his charisma. The foundation of Malcolm X's transforming legacy is that he gave to his constituency profound insights, ideas, and solutions grounded in their cultural historical reality with a clarity that they could understand (Clarke, 1994, 1995; Sales Jr., 1994; Strickland, 1994). Malcolm had the unique ability to "speak to the reader and the non-reader, the college professor and the illiterate, simultaneously, and his message would get across to all of them" (Clarke, 1994, pp. 138-139). His leadership was incorruptible, his position was unshakable, and his principles uncompromising, even in the face of the threats which eventually took his life.

This is not to suggest that he was inflexible and unwilling to change. As Wilfred Little (Malcolm X's oldest sibling) recalled:

It did not bother him to change. If you notice his life, he was always changing. And that comes back to that old thing we used to have about a fool never changes. He was always changing. He would let you know, 'look yesterday I thought such and such a thing, but today I found out this. So I am no longer sticking with that, I see it this way now.' And he would let you know that. (WLI, 1995)

All of life is a series of transformations, as individuals navigate and negotiate themselves to higher levels of consciousness. Malcolm X's life was no different as he transitioned from Malcolm Little, to Detroit Red, to Malcolm X, to El Hajj Malik El-

Shabazz. In these transitions, Malcolm manifested five stages in the development of his transformational leadership legacy:

Stage 1: *School leader (1932-1940)*

Malcolm was very popular in school where he was elected class president and was ranked third in his class academically.

Stage 2: *Street leader (1940-1948)*

Malcolm was a leader on the street with personality and served as model for others in the street. Hakim Jamal (1971) noted:

Meeting Malcolm, the man with the money, a gun, I saw that he had respect, he traveled, he had big white friends. He sold and used dope wisely, he dressed to kill, he could talk, he was in the know, people listened to him, people envied him.
(p. 31)

Stage 3: *Prison leader (1948-1952)*

Malcolm was the first prison minister for the Nation of Islam and head of his debating team.

Stage 4: *National Spokesperson for the Nation of Islam (1952-1964)*

Elijah Muhammad may be given credit for providing Malcolm with a familiar cultural and political programmatic platform that was the Nation of Islam. As National Spokesperson, Malcolm, however, may be given the credit for building the Nation to the cultural and political position that it was to become.

Stage 5: *International Pan-African leader (March 1964-February 1965)*

With an advisory group Malcolm formed the Organization of Afro-American Unity (OAAU) and the Muslim Mosque Incorporated (MMI). He traveled to Africa and the so-called Middle East to collaborate with the heads of state in forming branches of the OAAU on the African continent.

To truly study Malcolm X is to understand him through these five developmental stages and what got him to and through these stages. It is the transitioning through these five stages that Malcolm X develops into the dimension of transformational leadership and becomes a transformational leader and educator. These stages, provided the foundation for Malcolm's transformational leadership and educational legacy.

Transformational Leadership and Education in the Legacy of Malcolm X

The heart and soul of Malcolm X's transformational leadership, that which made his leadership transformational, is found in his drive for learning in both himself and in others. A. Peter Bailey, editor of OAAU's newsletter *Blacklash* and associate of Malcolm X during the last year and a half of his life, says:

People [are] always [asking] "What did [Malcolm] leave?" and I tell people that he left changed minds! You know, he didn't leave no buildings, no roads, he left *minds*! [He] literally [left] transformed minds. The first time I heard him speak I felt like somebody was literally pulling on my scalp and just pouring stuff into my brain. It was almost overwhelming that, you know, you were getting so much information that you didn't know how to take it all. It was and I not saying this in any kind of romantic sense, I'm talking literally, it was a *learning process*. (APBI, 1996, emphasis added)

While the five stages provided the foundation for Malcolm's transformational leadership, his educational legacy is the mechanism for making it work. Together, his leadership style and his educational commitments provide models of emulation by which his legacy can endure (Karenga, 1979).

Malcolm had a profound respect for the power of the spoken word. With this respect, first introduced by his mother and proliferated in prison by "Bimbi," (nee, John Elton Bembry) Malcolm sought to master the English language in all of its connotations. This resulted in him writing for the prison newspaper and being on the prison debating team. It also provided the foundation for his development in critical listening and critical analysis.

Malcolm had a profound respect and love for history; indeed, it was his most revered classroom discipline. History provided Malcolm with a way of acquiring factual verification as a basis for determining the truth of the African experience domestically and internationally. It also provided him with seeing the world through the lenses of others:

Of all our studies, history is best qualified to reward our research. And when you see that you've got problems, all you have to do is examine the historic method used all over the world by others who have problems similar to yours. Once you

see how they got theirs straight, then you know how you can get yours straight. (X, Malcolm, 1990, p. 75)

Malcolm stimulated, motivated, and activated intelligence and emotions to proaction. According to A. Peter Bailey:

Once you heard [Malcolm] speak, you never went back to where you were before. Even if you kept your position, you had to rethink it. For me, it was literally an awakening. (APBI, 1996)

Malcolm was highly disciplined in all of his pursuits. His high degree of discipline was at the center his personal and political activism. According to Sales Jr. (1994), "He identified and executed his task on time. Malcolm was punctual to a fault" (p. 209). His time consciousness caused him to deride his associates for their lack of discipline and time. "He once chastised [an associate] for being a few minutes late by leaving the meeting place and forcing [him] to wait hours for his return" (Sales Jr., 1994 p. 209).

Malcolm was intensely honest. While only one aspect of his high degree of moral judgment and responsibility, his honesty in keeping his word was compulsive; if he promised something he would extend himself to be sure that he came through. His honesty was demonstrated clearly with the OAAU in three ways: first, he was honest with himself by not letting his ego interfere with his inabilities. This was manifested when he surrounded himself with knowledgeable people who became his advisors. It was not uncommon for Malcolm to ask people questions about what they thought; second, he was willing to change his position on governance when new factors appeared to call for such change; and third, he spoke truthfully to the role of women in the human rights struggle and organizational structuring. Sales Jr. (1994), suggests that:

Malcolm's position on these issues [the inclusion of women in helping to shape the human rights revolution] created a space in subsequent organizational efforts to challenge the authoritarian charismatic model of leadership inherited from the Black church and the male chauvinism deeply embedded in the Civil Rights organizations. Malcolm X's prestige [helped in] legitimizing a freedom agenda that recognized the question of the liberation of women. (p. 210)

Malcolm was a master teacher (Bailey, 1990; 1996). He had the ability to redefine and present the redefinitions to the world in African terms or what is currently referred

to as African-centered terms. Malcolm was from the grassroots and he understood the oppressive conditions that pushed African American people to the margins of this society's existence. His teachings to Black people therefore, had a twofold message: first, the conditions in which you find yourself, is not a fault of your own, but is imposed by a system of White supremacy. Second, although the condition that you find yourself is not of your own doing, you have the responsibility to do something to change your condition. A master teacher always appeals to the inner recesses of the mind and as such "the main revolution . . . is a revolution of the mind" (Bailey, 1990, p. 27).

Malcolm was a master student (Karenga, 1979). In order to be a master teacher you must first be a master student. Malcolm provides a legacy of reading, studying, writing, listening, analyzing, and critiquing; indeed, his legacy compels the individual to read and write their self into emancipatory possibility. An authentic emancipatory pedagogue is one who exhibits her or his pedagogy as a teacher-student and a student-teacher (Freire, 1970, 1993). Gallen (1992) suggests that:

Malcolm was too ready. In the restaurant, mosque, ballroom, street, or lecture hall, he rarely missed the opportunity to teach. And like the best teachers he was equally willing and always eager to learn . . . Malcolm's passion for learning is reflected in what Benjamin Karim perceives as three things Malcolm loved most: "truth, knowledge, . . . and teaching"--and according to Karim, "the thing that he hated most was ignorance." (pp. 42-43)

In a final comment about Malcolm as educator Karim suggests that: "Malcolm was more of a teacher than he was the man the public thought he was" (in Gallen, 1992, p. 56).

Conclusion

Malcolm X was more than a movie, more than an X cap and a T-shirt, more than an historical icon reduced to print on pale pages. He was a complex quick mind who wanted to be a lawyer and came to be the counselor for the defense for people of African descent worldwide. He was the judge in the prosecution of the United States to be held in contempt for the violation of the human rights of African and other oppressed people. He is a transformational leader. Any attempt to understand Malcolm X beyond entertainment icon is to engage in the serious and committed study of the man as a human being dedicated to the human rights of Black and oppressed people

worldwide. Maya Angelou, as one of the persons who accompanied Malcolm to Accra, Ghana in May, 1964, has said

When people talk about Malcolm X, they make him seem larger than life and that's dangerous . . . The truth is, the man was as large as life, a man of great profundity, with a wonderful sense of humor and a loving sense of his people. (in Strickland, 1994, p. 227)

It is sad commentary to say that at the beginning of the 21st century, fifty years after the famous *Brown v. Board* judgment, all the conditions of Malcolm X's life reflect as much of today as it did forty years ago. His ideas shifted and evolved over the years as the scope of his thinking matured. Many of his evolving concepts are still applicable today because the conditions confronting Black and Brown people from the United States are the same. Intelligent Black and Hispanic students at the top of their class are being discouraged by an educational system that consigns these students to a hustler's life for survival as the educational gap between these students and their White counterparts widen. Many will not make it because they do not have the close-knit siblings that Malcolm had or the intelligence to develop beyond the prescriptive paradigm. The conditions that Malcolm spoke to that are still found include a systemic racism that does not support the social, political, economical, and educational development of Black people in United States. Because of this systemic racism there are problems within the Black community in the United States that cannot be solved by legislation--the notion of civil rights. Today we can learn from Malcolm X's realization that systemic racism requires an international perspective--that is, the ability to transcend civil rights to human rights. On August of 1964 in an article appearing in the *Egyptian Gazette* (25 August 1964) entitled "Racism: the Cancer that is Destroying America," Malcolm wrote:

The common goal of . . . [African]-Americans is respect as human beings, the God-given right to be a human being. Our common goal is to obtain the human rights that America has been denying us. We can never get civil rights in America until our human rights are first restored. We will never be recognized as citizens there until we are first recognized as humans.

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