Our Humanity

We are a magnificent people, awesome beyond measure, ancient as the origins of humanity itself in the womb of Mother Africa and deeply rooted in spirit—in traditions of familyhood and kinship, where we individually and collectively affirm our humanity and the connection to spirit by recognizing the humanity and divinity in others. It is here that we find humanity and perfectibility as expressions of the Divine.

From South Africa to South Carolina, from St. Croix to St. Louis, from Sudan to Suriname, from Mali to Mississippi, from Kemet (Egypt) to Kansas City, from Ouagadugou to West Oakland, from Brixton to Brooklyn, we have been and have borne visionaries and the valiant, peacemakers and powerbrokers, scholars and seers, the heavy hitters and healers. Our ancestors' accomplishments throughout the African continent—from Kemet in the North to Nubia in the East to Great Zimbabwe in the South and the classical civilizations of Ghana, Mali and Songhoy in the West—laid the foundation for mathematics, science, medicine, astronomy**,** philosophy, the arts and literature. The knowledge, labor and skills of African peoples throughout the Diaspora not only breathed life into the New World, but also produced the vast wealth that enriched European monarchies and New World nations, making it possible for the latter to claim their independence from colonial powers.

The African presence is documented on every continent: In Europe, the Moors ruled Spain for seven centuries; and in Asia, there were African roots in the Xia, Shang and Zhou dynasties of ancient China. When we listen to almost any variation of music that originated in the Americas—the work songs, spirituals, blues, jazz, the American popular song, gospel, R&B, rock and roll, hip-hop in the United States, and samba, salsa, rumba, mambo, reggae, calypso, meringue, bomba and plena, maracatu and other forms in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Jamaica, Brazil, Trinidad and throughout the Caribbean and South America—we are listening to the rhythms of African people. Some of Europe's most celebrated artists copied or drew heavily on African motifs—often without acknowledgement—to produce works widely considered innovative and "modern."

Likewise, American "modern dance" has benefited from African influences. Since the time of Imhotep, the Father of Medicine, African and African American scientists, mathematicians, physicians and inventors have achieved pioneering breakthroughs in these fields that remain excluded from the curriculum at all levels.

The world owes a debt to our Motherland.

Our African foreparents honored the Creator, the village, the clan, the family. They understood the oneness of being—that we do not stand alone but are all connected to one another. They affirmed their humanity by recognizing the humanity in others, a way of living and being that cherished cultural unity, diversity and affinity. Thus, African humanity was an expression of the Divine. From the Nile to the Niger to the New World, our African spiritual foundation nourished the spiritual strivings we express today through our diverse religious traditions. When they were barred from worshiping in dignity in the White churches of colonial America, religious leaders such as Absalom Jones and Richard Allen established African Methodist Episcopal churches that still exist today. We have continued to express our humanity and collective identity through the excellence we have achieved in every field of human endeavor that our foreparents managed to pry open.

Our accomplishments have benefited not only Black Americans but others as well. In education, our foreparents established schools in colonial New York and Boston, free public schools in the South during Reconstruction, and citizenship schools that defied Jim Crow in support of the Civil Rights Movement, which lifted the nation's consciousness. Our historically Black colleges and universities educated Native Americans as well as Japanese Americans following their release from World War II concentration camps. Despite segregation and degradation, our foreparents served with courage and distinction in the nation's armed forces, not only in defense of country, but also as acts of resistance and an affirmation of our humanity.

What would America be without our music, our style, grace and dance, our literature and oratory? Without Dr. Charles Drew's blood plasma and blood transfusion discoveries? Without African American scientific contributions to open heart surgery and pacemakers,

the development of the computer and innovations that revolutionized the transportation, food preservation, hair-care and other industries? Moreover, what do we remember of these achievements or the successful cooperative businesses and mutual aid and benevolent societies our foreparents established? What do we know today of the history of African American life insurance companies that anchored thriving urban economic hubs like Atlanta's Sweet Auburn Avenue, Tulsa's Black Wall Street, Claiborne Avenue in New Orleans or Durham's Little Hayti? Where would the world be today without the Black Freedom Struggle that inspired the Women's Movement, the Antiwar Movement, the Gay Rights Movement and others.

It is important to remember that our survival and our extraordinary accomplishments, overcoming centuries of adversity, have not been the result of the contributions of isolated individuals, but were nurtured in Black communities, Black churches and other Black institutions and organizations. After all, the Black church became the centerpiece of spiritual, social and political reform.

We exist here in America and throughout the Diaspora as African people with a legacy of human values that have endured through millennia, across time and space. Even if many of us are not fully conscious of this heritage, we are the beneficiaries of values that reflect respect for elders, self-mastery, patience, race pride, collective responsibility, moral restraint, devotion to family, reciprocity, productivity, creativity, courage, defiance and integrity. We are the creators of customs that ground us in a belief in the Divine, the sanctity of family and children, hard work and social responsibilities, the sense of excellence and appropriateness and the importance of history.

Our challenge today is not only to ensure our survival, but also to reach back and pass on this wondrous legacy of greatness to our children today and the generations to come.

Yes, our greatness has been tested, challenged and attacked through the centuries. The history of European contact with African peoples, at least as far back as the fifth century through the age of "discovery" until now, has been determined by feudalism, aristocracy, elitism, colonialism, greed and White supremacy. This history of dehumanization and destruction left our Motherland and our people scarred both on the continent and

throughout the Diaspora. Our beautiful Blackness has been devalued, distorted and demonized. In every generation, African Americans have been denied the right to live in the fullness of our humanity. Captured, kidnapped and enslaved, we have been made the object of negation and nullification.

We have been denied proper food, clothing, medical care, shelter, education and meaningful and productive work, both legally and extralegally. Consider, for example, that for most of the time that we have lived on these shores, it was against the law for us to read, write and enter libraries and theaters. Today, as deep-recession levels of unemployment remain historically high nationally—approaching 10 percent by some estimates—the devastatingly high rate of unemployment among Black families continues at twice that number. In New York City, 50 percent of Black men are unemployed. We have borne the shock and pain of one trauma after another, experiences that have shattered much of our sense of personal and collective identity, damaged our communities and devastated our families.

Only when we have sequestered ourselves together to unlearn the madness have we thrived. Because we have been so often miseducated, most of us have little memory or knowledge of our history of collective resistance and care for one another. By and large, without intervention, the deep emotional and psychological wounds of these traumas will continue to pass from one generation to the next like a toxic family legacy. The same way we have passed on our passion, pride and power, we are passing on our pain.

Our African American Experience: Being Black in an Anti-African Reality

Millions of our ancestors were snatched from homes, villages and societies in Senegambia, the Bight of Benin, the Gold Coast, the Bight of Biafra and the Congo and crammed into the floating prisons and death chambers of the Middle Passage. This invasion literally robbed the continent of untold genius and possibility. Our destination: centuries of bondage, deprivation and dehumanization throughout the Americas. For nearly 350 years, our foreparents and their descendants were enslaved under conditions that gave new meaning to brutality, oppression and depravity. Our ancestors were

relegated by laws and pseudoscience to the classification of subhuman, the better to justify the constant, state-sanctioned assault on their spirits, bodies and humanity.

And despite the demise of legal slavery, which eventually had even involved forced "slave breeding," the brutal disruption of our ability to live and prosper did not end. The Emancipation Proclamation was followed by virtual reenslavement through debt peonage, the Black Codes and Jim Crow laws that perpetuated oppression and subjugation. The Ku Klux Klan and like-minded Americans lynched thousands of our people—including women and children—sometimes as entertainment at Sunday picnics and advertised in local newspapers in advance. There were economic wounds, too; crippling barriers to financial resources have locked our people out of the economic mainstream, robbing us of the benefits of our labor and preventing our foreparents from accumulating and passing on wealth to the next generations.

Even now, brutality, violence and injustice continue to stalk us. Not one of us is immune. We are seeing the justice system dismantle the lives of our men and boys in myriad ways. Their killers are seldom if ever brought to justice for the crimes committed against them, as has been the case with all too many murders throughout the South. Black men have been the particular victims of police brutality. They have walked the streets with a bull's-eye on their backs, the targets of White supremacists, from the Klan to skinheads to just good ole boys—as in the case of James Byrd, who was dragged to his death in Jasper, Texas—or the targets of other young Black men who have been taught to hate themselves in a system of White supremacy. Scores of shootings by police—like those that killed Amadou Diallo, Sean Bell and too many others—are commonplace. A for-profit, privatized prison industry monitors the failure rates of fourth-grade Black boys in order to project the number of new prison cells it will need to build to remain profitable. Lobbyists for the prison industry profiteers lobby hard-on-crime politicians to divert funding away from education and into bonds for the building of new prisons, thus ensuring underfunded schools, the derailing of our children and a steady stream of new bodies in the school-to-prison pipeline or the morgue. Our children literally are faced with alienating schools or death on the streets.

And Black women have not fared much better. As Alice Walker states so beautifully in her poem "Her Blue Body Everything We Know," during slavery there was no need for pornography. "We were the thing itself," she writes, underscoring centuries of rape that our women came to know as they knew their own names. And when rape didn't work, women, too, were lynched or their lives were threatened in other ways, as Ida B. Wells-Barnett both reported on and experienced. When we call the names of Sean Bell and Oscar Grant, we must also call the names of Eleanor Bumpers, Tyisha Miller and 7-year-old Aiyana Stanley Jones of Detroit, all of them victims of police executions and a general lack of regard for the lives of Black people, seeing our lives as less valuable than the lives of Whites.

And all these years after the abolition of slavery, we find our communities crippled by a modern equivalent of enslavement: the mass incarceration of African Americans under the guise of criminal justice. Today, one million Black men are incarcerated (one in eight Black men between the ages of 25 and 34 are behind bars), and exploding numbers of African American women are being locked up throughout the country. Most of our people who were formerly incarcerated will return to our neighborhoods stripped of basic rights and needed access—from the right to vote, to public assistance, to school financial aid—unable to get a job, even at the ever-present fast-food chains in our community. Still we stand.

We are inspirers not just survivors.

We carry on. But we stand deeply wounded and in need of radical healing—for ourselves, our children and our community. Is there any wonder that such fundamental healing is called for? No other people has faced the centuries of physical and psychological brutality that Black people have endured. In the process of staying alive, we have internalized distorted beliefs, behaviors and perceptions that ultimately turn us against ourselves and one another. These, combined with institutionalized racism, have thwarted our potential and undermined our progress. Aided by the media's conspiratorial proliferation of toxic images of our people, a music industry that ravages our children and schools that miseducate, too many of us of all ages have come to view ourselves as inferior and unworthy. This historic assault has undermined the traditional articles of

faith that have sustained our communities: that we are all God's children, that to be human is to recognize the humanity of others and in so doing respond to them in humane and dignified ways. Because of this assault, too many of us accept society's devaluation of our African heritage and African American culture and even adopt a belief in White superiority.

Thus, centuries of oppression have also left us staggering under the weight of pernicious stress and the systemic lack of resources that sustain life, and in some cases, deep anger, which we typically turn in on ourselves or take out on the people closest to us. Alienated, disaffected and disconnected, we are killing ourselves. Often we try to anesthetize the pain by self-medicating: We overeat and eat all the wrong things. We smoke, do drugs and overindulge in alcohol. We have unprotected sex, a practice that has left Black women, who are about 12 percent of all women in this country, with 61 percent of all new HIV infections among women.

The cumulative effect of this litany of oppression has been an internalized alienation, self-inflicted abuse and historical, social and cultural amnesia. Are we as a community prepared to understand and address the impact of this oppression on our children; on the sense of identity and belonging our boys are seeking to satisfy, for example, when they walk around grabbing their crotches, holding onto their sagging pants with bent wrists and showing us and the rest of the world their behinds? Unknowingly, our young males are adopting a set of social mores forced upon them in prisons, which, along with the misogyny in contemporary rap music and videos, continues to have a devastating impact on our relationships, families and beloved community.

Even Black girls have begun to acquiesce in the violence engulfing their neighborhoods and schools, hiding razor blades in their mouths to slash and disfigure other girls in a bid to affirm their own sense of belonging. We must find effective, humanizing ways to impart the God-given gifts of our heritage and humanity to our children. Would recovering and sharing family stories of resistance and overcoming bring our children back from the brink to a sense of their humanity? What if we tell them about the Deacons for Defense and Justice of Bogalusa, Louisiana, who organized to protect their children and defended their community against Klan violence? About Ida B. Wells-Barnett's

fearlessness and Fannie Lou Hamer's divinely inspired sacrifices for our people? What if we tell them about how those men imprisoned at Attica didn't "sag" their pants but courageously defended their right to be treated as human beings?

In fact, we have what we need to begin the radical healing and begin it now, for we still carry within us the indomitable will and spirit that brought us through a harsh past. We carry within us our magnificent heritage and humanity.

Our heritage and humanity are bound by the age-old African belief that the family, our elders and our common ancestry are to be revered and respected. We are a people who traditionally hold elders in high esteem and rely on extended families as a reservoir of love and a strategy for survival and advancement.

It is a heritage and humanity that celebrates the beauty and power of art as a prodigious force. Our creative geniuses gave birth to music, dance, theater, poetry and paintings that would become catalysts for social change.

Ours is a heritage and humanity that values nourishing rituals, traditions and symbols. We demonstrate this at worship services, at family gatherings during the holidays and family reunions. Even if they appear to be separating from us, many of our children still embody these qualities in their own ways. Some of us are community activists who plan and attend rallies and hold our clenched Black fists high in resistance. Still more of us stand to sing the Black National Anthem as a symbol of self-determination and a reminder of our heritage and humanity. The African spirit has never stopped calling African Americans, and we are responding by traveling to our Motherland more than ever, some of us learning and speaking African languages, giving our children names to honor their heritage and adopting African rituals and ceremonies as a way of life. In New Orleans, Mardi Gras Indians, whose rituals eloquently embody the cultural continuity of our Africanness, still refuse to "bow down." And some of our young artists are contributing to a genre of conscious rap that speaks to our humanity. Ours is a heritage and humanity with religious and spiritual practices that humbly honor the Higher Power in each of us, that order the universe and give us guidance.

Our African ancestors were not stopped; they just kept going, kept moving our people forward. Our African ancestors—despite centuries of slavery meant to erase the extended self from ourselves—were not stopped; they just kept going, kept moving us forward. They carried our humanity and heritage with them and drew on this legacy for power, courage and resilience when they were captured and cargoed over the seas over the centuries; when they were beaten, tortured and raped. Their resilience and genius for surviving and thriving is ours. It is in us, in our DNA and ancestral memory. We carry this heritage legacy now, and as was true for our foremothers and forefathers, tapping this inspiration will light the way forward.

Section: Our Humanity—Introduction

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