CHAPTER 21

Capturing the Spirit of *Kwanzaa*

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Three hundred people stood together in an old Milwaukee library, now the home of the Wisconsin Black Historical Society and Museum. We followed the call of the evening's libation leader for the first night of *Kwanzaa* 1995. "Habari Gani," he intoned.

The celebrants responded with "Umoja," the principle we observe on the first night of *Kwanzaa*.

"Habari Gani," he repeated, waiting for a more passionate response.

A loud, highly charged "Umoja!" reverberated in the room. The echoes of pounding drums fed and nourished our spirits as the libation leader, an elder from Ghana, West Africa, pronounced the magical words that inspired everyone to join in the experience of this healing ceremony: "Let us call forth the ancestors from the East, from the West, from the North, and from the South." He poured water on the ground from a *kibombe cha umoja* (unity cup).

As the leader directed us to turn south, I gazed at the walls of this historic building, remembering the power of libation when Maya Angelou was guest speaker at a 1993 lecture at the W.E.B. DuBois Center in Accra, Ghana. Then I recalled the time I spent at the Slave Castles in Elmina, Ghana, during the 1993 National Council for Black Studies Conference. In my mind's eye, I could still see the sacred ceremony at the site of a holding station for captured Africans destined to board slave ships that would separate husbands from wives, parents from children, siblings from siblings, and families from families.

At Elmina we had hummed the African National Congress anthem, poured libation with blessed water from the Nile, and experienced the presence of our loved ones from whom we were parted by space, time, and water—but not by spirit. In that moment of stillness, we all felt a sense of magic as we stood in a close-knit circle and looked upon the heavens, feeling the earth shift beneath our feet as the pilgrimage spoke of the pain of separation and the bliss of reunion. We were filled with the harmony of the past folding into the present as the wind passed through our feet and filled our hearts with renewed energy. That same energy now returned to me at this Milwaukee *Kwanzaa* gathering more than 2 years later.

As we all turned south in the old library to remember our ancestors, I could hardly believe my eyes when I noticed a young couple who had also been on the Ghana tour with me. It was a moment of blissful reconnection. Together we celebrated the *Nguzo Saba,* the seven principles embodying the value system of *Kwanzaa*.

This moment was a powerful one in my understanding and appreciation of *Kwanzaa*, the African American cultural holiday that Maulana Karenga (1989) established in 1966 in response to the Watts riots in Los Angeles. I had been to a few other *Kwanzaa* celebrations but had not experienced such a powerful spiritual awareness. Other celebrations had seemed ritualistic, empty, and without real meaning for me. What made this experience different, in part, was my own act of calling forth my grandparents, William and Naomi Thomas, in whose name I was in the process of creating the William A. Thomas Harmony Center, a spiritual-psychological center project in Brunswick County, Virginia.

The principles and the order of Kwanzaa ceremonies are aligned with harvest festivals in traditional West African cultures. The opening of the ceremony invites the audience to call forth ancestors after the libation leader's presentation, during which many in the audience call forth the names of deceased loved ones they fondly remember. I felt spiritually invigorated as I stood and requested the presence of those who had proceeded me both in building a community and in helping those seeking guidance in life. The spirit of harmony filled the room where large gatherings turned out each of the 4 nights of the museum's *Kwanzaa* celebration. Each night, the seven principles that embody the *Nguzo Saba* value system were proclaimed and honored as many youths led the candlelit part of the ceremony, explaining the history and meaning of *Kwanzaa*.

The *Nguzo Saba* is Afrocentric in its embrace of a communal and spiritually grounded system that honors the earth, its people, and the ancestors. It addresses environmental and social imbalances by honoring core values that restore family structures to wholeness. The *Nguzo Saba* honors the importance of healthy relationships with our past and present so as to ground individuals and collectives in a prosperous future that is in integrity with self and community.

In *The Healing Wisdom of Africa,* Malidoma Some' writes:

> The general health and well-being of an individual are connected to a community, and are not something that can be maintained alone or in a vacuum. Healing, ritual, and community—these three elements are vitally linked.

Healing, ritual, and community—the goods that the indigenous world can offer to the West are the very things that the modern world is struggling with. Ritual in the indigenous world is aimed at producing healing, and the loss of such healing in the modern world might be responsible for the loss of community that we see. . . . When villagers act together on their need for healing and engage in such spontaneous gestures, they are requesting the presence of the invisible forces and are participating with those forces in creating harmony or symbiosis. (Some', 1998, pp. 22–23)

Kwanzaa, a Swahili term for the first fruits of harvest, represents a time (December 26–January 1) to encourage healing through the common bonds that nurture community. Children and youths, as symbolized by the *muhindi* (or corn) are the center of these celebrations, because they represent hope for the future. Local youths led the first night's celebration of *Umoja* with enthusiasm, vigor, and the spirit of love as they sang, recited poetry, and spoke with wisdom and confidence. Although many consider *Kwanzaa* to be a religious holiday, it is not affiliated with a particular religious group or sect; it is intended to promulgate principles and values to enhance an individual's spiritual life.

Each night the museum's table was colorfully decorated with a candleholder that held seven candles (*mishumma*) to symbolize ancestors—one black, three red, and three green, each representing a principle of *Kwanzaa. Mazao*, fruits and vegetables symbolizing the harvest, along with *muhindi* were carefully placed on the *mkeka*, a unity mat symbolizing a firm foundation. The *kibombe cha umoja*, the unity cup used earlier during the libation, was used by the younger members of the gathering. It symbolized the value of unity within families and communities. The youth leading this part of the ceremony cheerfully proclaimed the seven principles, the *Nguzo Saba*, and the meaning of this value system to the community:

1. *Umoja* (unity): to strive to help family, community, nation, and race.
2. *Kujichagulia* (self-determination): to define, name, and create for ourselves.
3. *Ujima* (collective work and responsibility): to build and maintain our community.
4. *Ujamma* (cooperative economics): to build and maintain community businesses.
5. *Nia* (purpose): to build toward restoring the traditional greatness of a people.
6. *Kummba* (creativity): to foster and build on the gift of beauty in the community.
7. *Imani* (faith): to believe in ourselves, our ancestors, and the righteousness of the struggle.

A wave of cultural pride filled the room and echoed from the smallest child to the oldest adult. Two youths sang *His Eye Is on the Sparrow,* a song

that symbolized our past, our present, and the recommitment to our future as a community.

On the second day of *Kwanzaa*, which emphasizes the principle of self-determination (*Kujichagulia*), I was filled with the spirit of determination to exercise committed action within the community of humanity. In the hours before our evening *Kwanzaa* ceremony, remembrances of my travels on the pre-Civil War-era underground railroad through New York, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island came to my mind and heart. At that time I had also visited nearly 20 towns and cities where African Americans had followed the North Star to celebrate universal freedom during the First of August celebrations in commemoration of abolition in the British West Indies on August 1, 1833. I recalled my visit to Harriet Tubman's home in Auburn, New York, and how impressed I was by the power of a woman who had devoted her life to freedom, sacrificing comfort and safety for a higher mission. I also recalled the warmth I had felt at Frederick Douglass's gravesite in Rochester, New York, and I envisioned his powerful presence at Washington Square on the First of August as people gathered to hear his words prophesying universal freedom and justice for all.

It was a sacred time of commemoration and dedication to ancestors and philanthropists across the ages who believed in humanity and divine equality. These First of August celebrations focused on the philanthropic deeds of British activists, freedom fighters around the world, and the sons and daughters of Africa. One hundred years later, Karenga called for a new order of business, through a celebration that would seek out specific African-inspired values to praise generations of people whose work has gone unsung in many European societies.

Today these ceremonies have special value for reuniting people of African descent with their ancestors, reconciling individuals and families in their efforts to overcome the painful memories of years of forced separation across continents. The ceremonies are blessings that honor the brave spirits of the past and the rich healing power of nature found in colors and harvest crops. The ceremonial praises involved promulgate healing across the ages. One can sense the power of the ancestors as the drums echo, bringing the core of our humanity into sync with the rhythms of the universe. People dance and move with the spirit of all times as they transport the spirits of their special loved ones into present space and time. Participation in the ceremonial experience is euphoric, much like the traditional West African harvest ceremonies that praise long-lost loved ones and the universe for the gifts of nature and the harvest, thus symbolizing the beginning of human settlement on earth. For instance, the Yam Festival of the Aburi of Akuapem, in the eastern region of Ghana, praises the spirits of the ancestors in prayer. Opoku (1970) quotes one such prayer:

> When I call one of you
> I have called all.
> Ye departed spirits of the seven
> Akan clans,
> Receive drink.
> Today is your lustral day.
> I have brought you a sheep, drink and new yam.
> Receive these and visit us
> This new year with a good harvest,
> Wealth and prosperity, fertility and long life,
> Peace and fame and rain and sunshine
> At their appropriate times.
> If ever we are called upon
> To share three things with any other nation,
> Let us have two.
> Let the evil one that plans evil for us
> Receive evil in return.
>
> —*(pp. 30–31)*

Even the ancient Greeks and Romans experienced the euphoria of harvest festivals and ceremonies, of ancestral worship and praises of nature embodied in the Eleusian Mysteries. There is little record of these secret rituals. What survives today are a few reports as recorded in the writings of Cicero:

> Nothing is higher than these mysteries. They have sweetened our characters and softened our customs: they have made us pass from the condition of savages to true humanity. They have not only shown us the way to live joyfully, but they have taught us how to die with a better hope. (Hamilton, 1969, p. 48)

The joy Cicero spoke of could be felt in the beat of drums that engaged the crowd in powerful moments of call and response during the second night of *Kwanzaa* in Milwaukee. Children led with sounds of joy, their hands steady on their instruments and their expressions full of intensity and a touch of the spirit. They incited the same feelings in the crowds of people who were determined on that same night of *Kujichagulia* to increase African American voting in the city and confront local issues affecting the poor and oppressed.

The guest speaker that night, Molefi Kete Asante, spoke of a history of struggle and emphasized the contributions of Harriet Tubman, the Moses of her people. Asante voiced his high esteem for her vision and sacrifice that led people to a new consciousness when she helped make the Underground Railroad an alternative to slavery. Her persuasion aroused the courage of the uncommitted and fearful to take action.

The remaining nights of the *Kwanzaa* celebration echoed the spirit of the previous nights. The sounds of gospel, the words of poets coupled with African drumbeats, and the voices of educators charting issues, challenges, and pledges of unity helped us reunite with wise spirits across the ages.

When the doors of the Wisconsin Black Historical Society and Museum closed on the final night, a security guard escorted me to my car amidst the snow and ice. He expressed surprise that I had left every previous night for my car without the protection of an escort. Strangely, it had never occurred to me that I had been in any danger. Here I was, an unescorted woman in the heart of Milwaukee, but I never felt alone. The power of the spirit of love and spiritual connection had surrounded me after every *Kwanzaa* ceremony, and I never felt unprotected.

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