

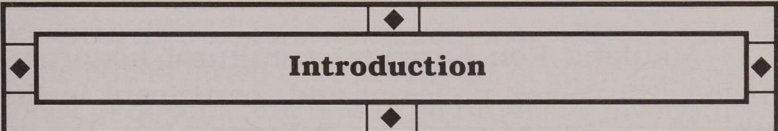


Speeches

SERIALS DEPARTMENT

How Can These Bones Live?*

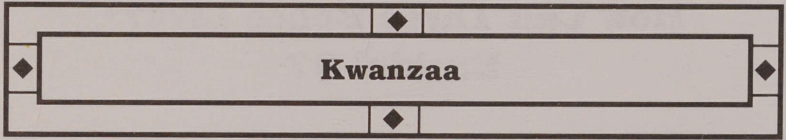
Ezekiel 37



Introduction

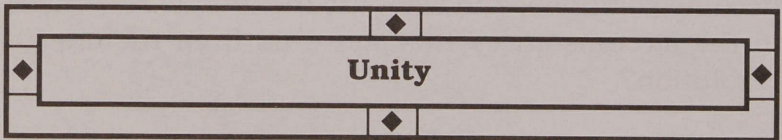
This address discusses reviving dry bones through the seven principles of Kwanzaa. When Ezekiel has God ask the question, "Can these bones live?," he reenacts many experiences of the Jews. Can a people divided by social, economic and geographical distance endure hardships and remain intact? Is it possible for persons, even those of noble birth, to remain whole, stripped of everything familiar to them? Can the bones, even though they miraculously reunite, acquire a vitality similar to their previous state? These were questions Ezekiel asked in his vision. Seeing that God can bring life to that which, by all rational thought, is dead, Ezekiel determined that life, not death, is God's will for his people. His question was, "Can these bones live?" The question for those who follow in faith must be, "How can these bones live?" What are the peculiar circumstances in every age that present a problem needing solutions, and what are the unique responses to the circumstances that move us from rhetoric to resolution?

*September 1996



Maulana Ron Karenga, a cultural historian, nationalist, college professor and participant in the 1967 Black Power Conference in Newark, New Jersey, in an attempt to provide a unique response to Ezekiel's "Can these bones live?," initiated Kwanzaa, an African-American holiday. *Kwanza* is a Swahili word that means "to begin." The holiday is celebrated for seven days following Christmas. Its intention is to enable the Black Community to experience a cultural event related to their historic background. Kwanzaa is not a religious holiday, as such. However, it is a spiritual window through which we view desirable cultural and moral values. The seven principles of Kwanzaa are:

- Unity
- Self-determination
- Collective Work/Responsibility
- Strong Economic Base
- Purpose
- Creativity
- Faith



The first principle of Kwanzaa is unity. From Ezekiel we learn that many of the problems faced by Israel were caused by disunity. The nation was divided

into the northern and southern kingdom. This division was caused by a power struggle between competing factions, often of the same family line. The people were divided on their religious practices; some were strictly drawn to their historic and traditional religious values, while others flirted with the rituals of other nations or tribes. For some, there was no ritualistic involvement at all. Ezekiel and the thousands who went into forced exile in Babylon demonstrate this lack of unity. When allowed to leave, many chose to remain.

In the African-American Community there is need for greater unity. We were saddened just recently when much troubled Tupac Shakur was gunned down by an opposing rap group. In newspapers each day we read about the rivalry between the Bloods, Crips, Jamaica Boys and the myriad street gangs in our communities. Gangs, it is said, create identity and togetherness. If that were so, how can it be that they kill each other by the scores? Then, too, in your community and mine, the rate of "black on black" crime, especially murder, is of epidemic proportions. It is so pervasive that the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta is now treating this situation as a communicable disease. A lack of unity is the issue.

The causation for much of the malaise affecting the Black Community is external in nature. In Ezekiel's time the external factors were Assyria, Babylon, the Philistines and other surrounding influences. For Black Americans the external forces are drugs smuggled from Colombia, Mexico, Nigeria and the possible flooding of drugs in South Central Los Angeles by the Central Intelligence Agency. A lack of unity promotes such heinousness in our communities. In those times when

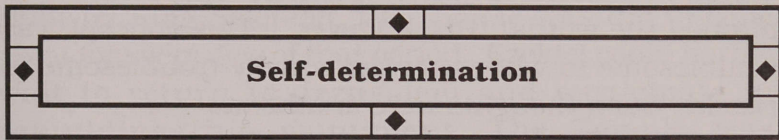
we have been united around lofty goals, such external forays into our enclaves would not be tolerated.

It would appear that the situation that made us strong as a people is weakening as we grow stronger. I refer to the slave trade that created the pattern of family isolation. Slavery caused us to think of ourselves as less than human, objects to be used and abused. The fact of the matter is that during this period the Black man was considered only three-fifths of a white man. We survived such indignity and grew stronger.

I mention here the unity that sustained the bravery of those brothers and sisters who stole away to brush arbors and river banks to sing of freedom in coded language. Then, there are those souls who, with their sense of worth, endangered their own lives escorting others to freedom in northern climes, often pursued by bounty hunters. Only a unified people could do this.

An example of this unity established Morris Brown College in Atlanta, one of the few Black institutions solely owned and operated by Blacks in this nation. True, Morris Brown has had its share of burdens in recent years. It has been dangerously close to being discontinued by its accrediting agency, near to the abyss of financial disaster and on the precipice of student abandonment. And yet, I am proud to say that this venerable institution today is one of the few African-American schools enjoying an operational surplus, experiencing a growth in enrollment and student retention, in good standing with its financial and educational accreditors, expanding programs. The unified efforts of its alumni made this possible.

What is unity? Too many of us think that unity is singleness of means. To the contrary, unity is singleness of ends, singleness of purpose, singleness of unifying principles. Unity is taking each other seriously enough to learn how each of our differences, each of our unique qualities can be wed with those same virtues in others toward a common end. When we achieve a degree of unity, we will have moved light-years ahead in the realization of the highest and best in the African-American Community.



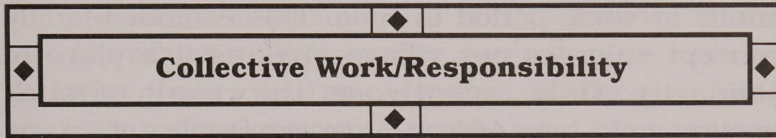
The principle of Kwanzaa celebrated on the second day of the observance is self-determination. Ezekiel dreamed of the future of Israel. As a result of their forced exile, too much of their life and death was in the hands of others. Babylon controlled their destiny, and many had lost hope that it could ever be different. On the banks of the Chebar River they would ask, "How can we sing the songs of Zion in a strange and foreign land?" Indeed, how could they sing their songs? Whenever a people has lost its sense of being, hope or appreciation for its uniqueness, despair is the necessary outcome.

Self-determination in one aspect of its meaning has always been characteristic of Black life in this land. It was this motivation that propelled Madame C. J. Walker, the well-known manufacturer of beauty products, into economic prominence. Self-

determination led to the establishment of burial leagues, insurance companies, savings and loan associations, banks, credit unions, educational institutions, varied businesses and social agencies. And yet, in another sense, self-determination has been a concept avoided in the Black Community. Black people have been loyal to the society in which they found themselves. They thought of self-determination as a chasm between Black and white people that was looked upon as divisive. You have but to examine the Freedom March in Mississippi where Stokeley Carmichael first intoned the words, "Black Power." This concept was troublesome to whites; it was equally troublesome to Blacks. Such thoughts were anathema.

Today, fortunately, there is a more reasonable understanding of self-determination and Black Power. Self-determination is a concept that is strengthening to all concerned. In China in 1951 a movement was begun known as the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. The church in China was to be characterized as self-supporting, self-administering and self-propagating. This Three-Self Movement is the state-recognized concept of Christianity, ensuring that the church remains independent from foreign influences. It is to be something other than a legacy of the western missionary endeavor of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This development, the result of the Cultural Revolution in China, has had varied impact. When China's doors were closed in 1951, the church, though present throughout the country in many forms, seemed small and ineffective. When the doors reopened in 1979, there is ample evidence that the church had thrived during its hiatus. Today, without western influence,

China's church is vibrant and growing.



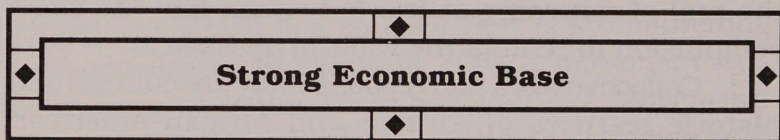
The third principle of Kwanzaa is collective work and responsibility. The prophet Ezekiel was upset over his existential circumstances and that of his fellow exiles by the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem. Built by King Solomon, the Temple was the rallying point for every Jew of that period. Ezekiel could hardly wait to return to Jerusalem and participate in rebuilding this monument. The Temple was reconstructed within twenty-three years, the result of the zeal of returning exiles. Nehemiah had the same compulsion to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Collective work and responsibility are cultural and historic features of African and African-American people. The western concept of individualism—"doing your own thing"—is foreign to our cultural ethos. Ours is more akin to the East Africa proverb, "Because I am, we are, and because we are, I am." You probably are aware of the recent flap heard at the Republican Convention by presidential aspirant, Bob Dole, where Hillary Rodham Clinton was ridiculed for her recently-released book, *It Takes a Village to Raise a Child*. This title is not strange in the Black idiom, for it is an African adage. Both speak volumes about our rich collective spirits.

In the Black Community the family is broader than mother *and* father, mother *or* father. It embraces

grandmother, grandfather, uncle, aunt, cousin or a friend whose relationship was with a member of the family at some period in time. This extended-family concept enlarges our village, making it a place of solidarity. Only recently, as the result of work requirements, have African-American families given any consideration to the placement of their elderly into nursing-care facilities. One need only go to Africa to see the historic rationale for home care of the elderly.

Taken seriously, this third Kwanzaa principle can further enrich individual and family life. It can enhance family values, forming the basis for the next generation of precious children. They, then, will do the same for their progeny. With such values the tradition lives into countless generations.



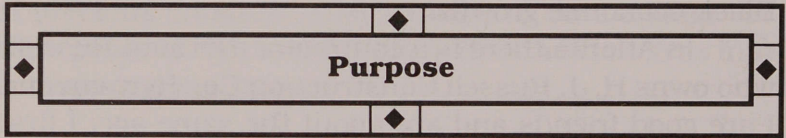
The principle for Kwanzaa's fourth day calls for a strong economic base. This is a term relative to Black and white America. If you compare the African-American economic base with that of white America, the percentage is paltry. However, if you compare the Black base to that of most other nations, the African-American economic situation would dwarf all others, with the exception, of course, of white America. For example, African Americans control almost \$300 billion, more than all but seven countries in the world. What, then, is the problem? Black wealth, for the most part, is static in nature; that is, it does not produce great wealth.

\$300 billion invested at a 5% rate of return would create an additional \$15 billion dollars of income each year.

African Americans tend to be consumers rather than producers. With too few exceptions we earn our salaries or our inheritances and we live up to the limits of their buying capacity. Our massive buying power, for the most part, is spent with corporations outside our racial group; we bank with white banks, buy small and large items from white establishments. Thus, when we spend our money, it circulates only once. The manufacture and marketing of consumer goods within the Black Community could have a telling effect on Black economic growth.

In Atlanta there is a contractor, Herman Russell, who owns H. J. Russell Construction Co. Herman and I are good friends and are about the same age. I first met him when I moved to Atlanta thirty-two years ago when he was a small plastering contractor. A graduate of Tuskegee University, he inherited the company from his father. During succeeding years, Herman became what is known as a joint-venture partner. That is, he would bid on many of the small and large jobs awarded in and around Atlanta. His was one of the few firms capable of providing the expertise and the bonding necessary to compete for jobs. Today, Herman is one of the nation's largest contractors, Black or white. He is a builder in just about every major contract awarded in Atlanta. Much of Atlanta's airport, Georgia Dome, Federal Building, apartment complexes, public and mixed income housing units, etc., are built by Herman Russell. During 1995 he engaged in about \$175 million of construction in Atlanta, the seventeenth largest contractor in the city.

But that's not the end of the story. Herman owns beer distributing firms, airport concessions, major interests in Citizens Trust Bank, property management companies, land developments and other ventures. He has brought his children into the management of the Russell empire and the Company will outlive him. This is what is required. Obviously, most of us cannot operate at such a lofty level, nor can we invest at such a plateau. Many Blacks do have the resources, however, to expand beyond our consumerism. The time has come to do so for the sake of our children.

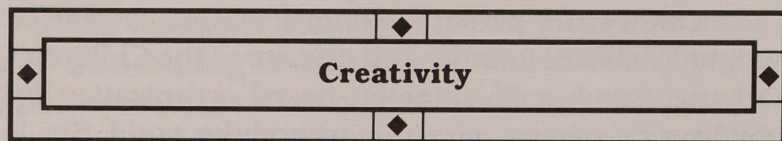


Purpose is the fifth Kwanzaa principle. There is a well-worn adage, "If you don't know where you are going, any road will get you there." Purpose is the landmark that will keep you on track, even when you are temporarily stalled, forced to retreat or go forward more circumspectly than you would wish. Jeremiah, Nehemiah, Ezekiel were all prophets during the Babylonian Captivity, a period of about seventy years. Carted off to a strange land and enmeshed in a new and different cultural setting, these men and the thousands they influenced never lost their sense of purpose. Uppermost in their minds was re-establishing Jerusalem to its previous grandeur, rebuilding the impenetrable walls around the city, and most of all, rebuilding the Temple. When there is a sense of purpose, hardships are endurable.

One of the persons whom I admire is Marian Wright Edelman, founder and director of the Children's Defense Fund, a Washington-based organization for children's advocacy here and around the world. She is one of Washington's most effective lobbyists on behalf of children. Her slogan is, "Leave no child behind." She works tirelessly to achieve this purpose.

"Leave no child behind" is appropriate because there is documentation that this generation of children and the next will be the first in history to be less affluent than their parents. This is true economically, socially and in accomplishments. With the curtailment of Affirmative Action Programs, it is likely that fewer African-American youth will have access to the better life. Additionally, by the year 2015 almost half of America's labor pool will be minority persons. This at a time when the superhighway of cyberspace will demand technically-educated persons. This at a time when robots will seriously compete with human beings for production of goods and, increasingly, for services. Affirmative Action was sacrificed on the altar of America's amnesia. It is felt by many that African Americans no longer need assistance in our quest to throw off the shackles of an inhumane past.

My clarion call to Black people everywhere is to remain focused, to develop a sense of purpose and execute it with resolve. Not to do so runs the terrible risk of creating within ourselves and our children increasing hopelessness. Hopelessness leads to despair; despair leads to reckless abandon and reckless abandon leads to the acceleration of the bizarre, pathological behavior so commonplace today. We cannot afford to sacrifice another generation of our children to despair and its effects.



Creativity, the sixth principle of Kwanzaa, is the utilization of those gifts, innate and developed, for the corporate well-being of ourselves and for others. For Israel, forced for seventy years into a culture that constantly demanded their adaptation to adverse circumstances, creativity was maintaining their sanity and protecting their environment to the best of their ability by continuing to do those things recalled from their collective memory. Thus, they built homes, married, conducted their religious practices and concerned themselves with the quality of their physical space. Creativity is taking what you have available to you and making it serve your needs until you can do better.

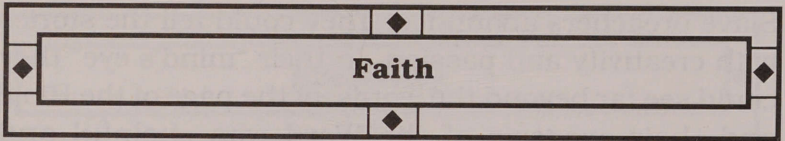
Who better than our ancestors perfected the art of creativity? I remember as a child seeing my father's nephew, Cousin Willie we called him, take to his job at the Armour factory in Omaha pot liquor and cornbread for his midday lunch. African Americans eat chitterlings, liver, pig feet, pig ears, and tripe today because these were the things that their slave masters threw away. The cuisine of our past was creatively crafted. We survived with what was available.

Our religious life was no different. It, too, was creative. The master forbade the slave from learning to read and write. The Bible, heard from the balconies of the master's church, became the medium for learning religious practices. These narratives were told over and over again in those places where it was safe to assemble.

Slave preachers abounded. They could tell the stories with creativity and passion. In their "mind's eye" they could see far beyond the words of the page of the Bible and their exegesis of the Word was helpful and inspiring. Creativity is the hallmark of our past.

We must help our children learn everything positive that is being embraced by anyone today. However, we must go beyond that which is obvious. We must help our children interpret the ink spots or, as my favorite philosophy teacher did, helped his students write themes about what they "saw" on blank sheets of paper. You would be amazed how expressive such a practice can make you. Your mind is free to wander beyond the bounds of the obvious to the realms of imagination.

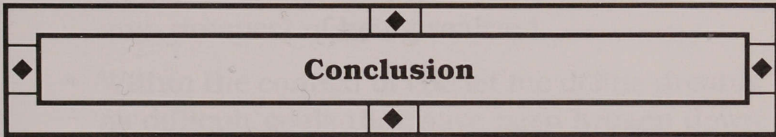
For years to come it will be necessary to emphasize our creative genius. Circumstances are changing, but not nearly fast enough to lessen that need. Creativity is the way music, locked in our minds, is given expression. It is the means by which the prose or poetry of our souls is unleashed. Creativity is the basket hoop nailed to a garage wall that produces a Shaquille O'Neal or a Michael Jordan. It is the dirt-road track, full of potholes, that enables Michael Johnson to reach his fullest potential, or for a phenomenal athlete such as Jackie Joyner-Kearsey to be the world's most versatile female performer. Creativity is the key that unlocks the doors to our survival.



The final consideration is faith, the seventh principle of Kwanzaa. While not used biblically to describe the conditions of the Jews in Babylon, everything they encountered there has to do with faith. During captivity they looked toward a different situation. God would somehow make it possible for them to feed their young, build their houses, marry and enjoy life on the banks of the Jordan rather than on the unfamiliar shores of the Chebar River. It took the military might of Cyrus of Persia to accomplish this freedom. His subjugation of Babylon led to the return of the Jews. Forty-three thousand trekked across the desert to their beloved Jerusalem. Their faith had been rewarded.

Faith, according to the Book of Hebrews, is "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." This ancient formulation is as "contemporary as today's newspaper." We all hope for a humane administration of the recent welfare reform bill. On the one hand, our hope is that the lessening of Affirmative Action Programs and the shrinkage of government grants for education will not set us back in our quest for educational opportunity. Hope is alive that African Americans will be able to take full advantage of employment opportunities, adequate housing, portable health benefits, educational advancements and all the other things that make life rich and full. These are the substance of things for which we hope.

On the other hand, faith is also the evidence of things not seen. This statement is not intended to be political in nature. One must say, however, that the current Democratic President has given sufficient evidence of his sensitivity to the things outlined above. It is still to be achieved, but we can have every confidence that our needs will be met, provided of course, that we participate in the process of making our desires known and our votes recorded. Then and only then can we enjoy the benefits of realized faith. It is active faith, a participatory faith.



The time to act is now. I identify the seven principles of Kwanzaa as a formula for our advancement. Followed consistently, they can provide each of us with a challenging future. Thus, we can answer Ezekiel's question, "Can these bones live?" Our answer will be a resounding "Yes," if we adhere to the seven principles that resurrect our scattered, emaciated sinews and bones: Unity, Self-determination, Collective Work/Responsibility, Strong Economic Base, Purpose, Creativity and Faith.

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