

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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## **Revolutionary Patience** **Nafsi ya Jamii** **By Wilson Riles** **BC Columnist**

One day, my five year old grandson asked me what super power I wanted to have. His world was intensely populated with superheroes from Ninja Turtles through Hancock, one of the many black superheroes, this one played by Will Smith in the movie with the same name. Emilio, my grandson, was trying to figure out what superhero he wanted to be like. Play is where children put on and take off aspects of character as part of a period of personality and character formation. This superhero play allows children to find a semblance of meaning, comfort, and safety in a threatening world.

In modern times, a more and more bewildering number of fictional characters are thrown at kids with little guidance or notice by their parents or guardians; most of these fictional beings are designed simply to hold the kids' eye balls in rapt attention, titillate them, and get them to pester their parents to buy something. Ugh! There is very little evidence of any positive character building or much concern for the psychological and relational difficulty that the behaviors of some of these fictional personalities might present to children who emulate them.

If you don't already, I would advise parents to sit down and watch some of these shows with their kids and try to give them some guidance about what to emulate and what should be rejected. In my poor attempt to do that, I told my grandson that revolutionary **patience** was the super power that I wanted.

Emilio's come-back was – of course – “patience is not a superpower...it cannot be a superpower because everybody has it.” I told him the truth; that that is the case for almost all superpowers. Superpowers are most often exaggerations of powers that we all have already in some form or fashion. Why not the super power of patience? He had no come-back to this and furrowed his brow in contemplation. I think that conversation helped him in ways he is not yet aware of. This boy kid, now, has the patience to listen to boring teachers, to creatively entertain himself outside of media bombardment, to allow other kids their turn in games, and to play with kids younger than he. His fantasy life is not totally filled with destroying things and killing monsters (including labeling other human beings as such and killing them). This is not to say that one conversation is all it takes.

In repeating this story to friends and family, I came to realize how poorly understood the power of patience is in our modern world. It seems even less understood than the power of nonviolence. Both concepts run counter to what survives of Western cultural memes because of the severe imbalance of our preferences for *dominance and control* memes. This preference is part-and-parcel of the rapacious, unnatural global capitalism that will bring our species to extinction. (Note that the world will go on and rectify itself after humans are gone.) The nature of our Western lives is dictated to by our obsessions for power and control – and right now!

In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell talks about the cross-cultural nature of the hero dynamic. “A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.” It is not the phenomenon that differs from culture to culture but the emphasis and source of the hero's power. Leaders are leaders because they have followers; when the followers turn away, leadership disappears. So who holds the power? Even imperialists must convince armies, inventors of weapons, and bankers to follow their lead; great empires collapse most often from within the elites. Western culture is unique in terms of its predominant presentation of violent, warring male heroes that stand apart from their communities because of unique individually derived abilities.

Campbell's work has been consciously applied by a wide variety of modern writers and artists, for example, in creating screenplays for movies. Perhaps the best known is George Lucas, who has acknowledged a debt to Campbell regarding both the original *Star*

*Wars* trilogy and its prequels. During these times when war and warriors are losing their cache and where struggles are exposed for their moral complications and mixtures, it is more difficult to associate real war and warriors as a vehicle for heroism rather than villainy. We see – in these times – the rise in popularity of science fiction movies (*Prometheus*, *Men in Black 3*) and vampire movies (*Lincoln the Vampire Slayer*) where we can imagine **pure** heroes and evil that **justly** need to be utterly destroyed.

In a talk in Madison, Wisconsin, the prophetic environmental author, Terry Tempest Williams offered one definition of revolutionary patience. She said, "It's working together with neighbors who you don't always agree with but you don't walk away from...revolutionary patience is that which yields long-term change." In the same way that nonviolence is a commitment to the belief that all human beings are human and not monsters, revolutionary patience is a commitment to the connectedness of all things and that all things will eventually find their right, just place within The Whole. We are called on to continuously engage and struggle in a conscious fashion. That means that we won't always get things our way because we, individually, are not the holders or the arbiters of **truth and light**. To think so is childish.

IMHO, the mistake that is made about nonviolence and about revolutionary patience derives out of the imperialist and dominance screens we have strapped to our minds. We rarely remove those superhero **masks** which comforted us so much in childhood. We relish those feelings of possessing unnatural, hidden superpowers that enable us to smash all our foes and challenges, including those super villainous ones. In fact it is the existence of super villains that gives our unnatural selves meaning and justification. We are so stuck in this dynamic that we are prone to invent and define our opponents as super villains to give us a reason for living our elitist character. Our subterranean desire to fulfill childhood fantasy has led to the ultimate dominance behaviors: the creation, use, and threatened use of The Bomb (the nuclear bomb), the use of extra legal killer drones, and the visions of irrational, larger-than-life villains like Osama Bin Laden. We cast our leaders into the "clothes" of superheroes and are disappointed when we find that they are only humans.

Revolutionary patience is a real and adult stance. It incorporates the wisdom of a traditional seven-generation perspective. We must learn to shed the individual superhero character and move with the knowledge of how political action and movement will reverberate

seven-generations in the future. In reality, power is a shared commodity that cannot be individually acquired by birth or otherwise. Only in fantasy and myth are there individual invincible superheroes or super villains. Comfort is found in family and in building community and you cannot fight imperialism by becoming an imperialist.

*For Mr. Riles, the following is an explanation of the meaning of the Swahili term "Nafsi ya Jamii":*

*Nafsi ya Jamii is the Swahili phrase that translates in English to "The Soul Community". Real community is the next phase in the process of seeking individual justice through social change. To be guided by the words of Howard Thurman: "Don't ask what the world needs; ask what makes you come alive, and go do that. What the world needs is people who have come alive." Maintain a Seven Generations perspective in all that is done; honoring the generations who've come before and mindful that our actions will have an impact for the generations who come after. Additionally, recognize that all of us are cultural beings; we include deep cultural understanding and experience in all that is done.*

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