

## Burn it down: reading Malcolm X in Rochdale

John Siddique

### Nineteen Eighty-Seven

Frontline Books Manchester. Close to Piccadilly Gardens. Down cement stairs into a sense of radical possibilities and alternatives. I've given up drugs and cut my hair and am looking for clues to live a clean, sacred, meaningful life. I come to Manchester every Wednesday to go to a meditation class and I often visit this bookstore beforehand. On this day I buy *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* as an audio book on cassette. I don't know what makes me want to know him. I never knew my dad much, maybe I need the sense of a fatherly voice to guide me in a world that I didn't know then was not created for me?

I get back to Rochdale around 11pm and ride up in the elevator to my 16<sup>th</sup> floor flat. Smell of other people's food lingering. Ringing sounds and voices as you rise. I came to this flat after nine months of homelessness. I own almost nothing: a bed that my massi Lily bought me, and a blue PVC couch that I found dumped outside, I have an

Hitachi boom-box that I braved a visit to my mother's house to retrieve. I play the first side of Tape 1 and Alex Haley's voice intones Malcolm's early life: young 'Red', the house surrounded by the KKK, the murder of his father, the oppression and the fear, the beginnings of a way through crime. I listen to all the tapes in one sitting and realise that the audiobook is abridged, so buy the book itself the following week. As you move through the story, through the book, you meet each Malcolm.

If we pause here for a minute and you think of him, which version of him comes to mind? Nation of Islam Malcolm? Denzel Washington? The voice from the early speeches speaking of the need for separation from whiteness? The stories of the press that he was a hate preacher? Post Hajj, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz and his reassessed take on working together?

I hope I am wrong but most people never remember that Malcolm was a spiritual teacher. After reading Kahlil Gibran, Richard Bach, Stephen Levine and a bunch of yoga texts as a teenager, which first set me on my course, Malcolm was my first real teacher. I'd been looking for someone with real answers to the conundrum that was my life. I always felt that I was in the wrong and had to fit in somehow. Malcolm not only gave me my first permission to be a person of colour, he showed me something incredibly profound. The Malcolm most people never remember was a seeker who put the voice of his soul above all outer circumstances, and it was this

listening to the voice and needs of his soul that fuelled his entire journey. We usually look at the facts and details of the journey as being the thing itself, but it is this internal quest for truth, humanity and real freedom in Malcolm that spoke loudest to me. It didn't just resonate for me, but it made me see that my own soul and way ahead lay in committing completely to only this.

Malcolm then translated this into the outer world, speaking, talking and fighting from his soul for his and our freedom. That inner journey and the courage to actually heed it seems to me to be the point so many of us are missing and selling ourselves so cheaply for simulacra of. Malcolm was prepared to simply walk away from anything that was unreal or corrupted as soon as he realised it was so. We see this happen over and over again as we look across his lifespan. What more could I ask from a father figure than the courage of truth? Not 'his truth', in that falsely individuated way of our day, but the truth and the realignment of life that happens as we beings live from that actual place of *is-ness*.

I learned slowly that any attempt at getting rid of yourself is not freedom; being someone else, even the stories we tell of ourselves, is not our freedom. Not even circumstances where I found myself being fast-tracked and held up as the modern face of a movement are freedom of being. I mistook emasculation, and bland greyness for spiritual development, when they are only self lies and repression and

nothing else. It was the remembrance of Malcolm, when Spike Lee's movie came out in 1992, and the hearing of his speech in which he tells of the time of slavery in white American history, when the enslaved house negro would kiss up to the slave owner so much that if the 'master's' house was on fire he would say 'our house is on fire,' and do all he could to protect it. Meanwhile, the negro of the field would be the one waiting for the opportunity to burn it down and escape. I knew that I was of the field. The line of my father's family in India were farmers of sugar cane and cotton, but all our land is lost since partition. In that beautiful prison of gold paint, incense, Buddha statues and prayer flags, my rebellious spirit woke back up. I discovered that my spirit cannot coconut for anyone, for any price, or idea of a prize, and it will not let me get away with the reduction of my inner or outer self.

### **Twenty Twenty-Five**

One hundred years since the birth of Malcolm Little, Red, Malcolm X, El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. I watched a talk with bell hooks recently where she says that the cult of whiteness adopts aspects of our cultures in order to look like they are being edgy or doing something meaningful, but at any moment they can always snap back to their fascist ways as they have never truly left the home of white supremacy. One day we might reach the field beyond black and white, but we can't get there if we won't even admit to it here and be humble and honest in the face of where we have been and what we must heal.

Walking in the footsteps of myself is a place of faltering, but always there is the callback of the soul. Brother Malcolm showed us that. He died to show us that. One hundred years since his birth and it seemed like we were going somewhere for a while and now we've gone right back again. The old world's tendencies, when unintegrated, loops around in eighty-year cycles of history. Fascism and white supremacy, while being highly in the minority, have new, powerfully-funded mainstreams to manufacture their consent as they dazzle the gullible and unconscious with their bread and circuses.

### **Early Morning, 19 January Twenty Twenty-Five**

The final day of 'Genocide Joe's' Presidency – handing off the next turn of the wheel into the long descent into neo-fascism in North America. Perhaps some will realise that all this is, and always has been, a karma country, a karma world, and they will turn to face the truth – that our karma is not a punishment, rather it is our dharma, our teacher. That it is the opportunity to look from truth and to respond in meaningful action. Perhaps they will turn to listen, finally, to the voice of their soul as our brother Malcolm showed us with his life.

It is 5am on the day that ceasefire is supposed to begin in Palestine. I am sitting in bed writing these words, waiting, praying that we will one day raise our

consciousness as a whole. The last thing Malcolm wrote, a few months before his murder, was a piece for *The Egyptian Gazette* on Palestine. It reads like it was written just today. Deference politics are proffered at every turn for our capture, to keep those of us who desire constructive and collective change under division and control. So while the stories we share of Malcolm Little, Red, Malcolm X, and El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz are great to fit a narrative here and a situation there, nothing other than a feeling will be achieved by the memes or soundbites we've currently mistaken for engagement. Malcolm stands unfallen as a wonderful example of a man committed to the deepest realisation and expression of truth through his soul meeting his karma as his teacher. If we would dare to look at our lives in this way, we would find that his deeper example is a calling for our very blood to remember and act upon it.

**Burn it down.**

**John Siddique** is the author of *Signposts of The Spiritual Journey*, a book about accessing greater meaning in our lives, and seven other books. His poetry collection, *Don't Wear It on your Head*, is a perennial favourite with younger readers. *New York Times* correspondent Bina Shah calls him 'one of the best poets of our generation.' His work has been featured in *Time*, *The Tablet*, *Granta*, the *Guardian*, *Poetry Review*, *The Rialto* and on BBC Radio 3 and 4.

Besides his books and writing life, Siddique is a meditation teacher, and is the creator of two popular online meditation courses.

A recording of this text can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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