

[The following was published in 2005 to honor the Champ at the grand opening of the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, Kentucky]

The Measure of a Man

Ali's Legacy Is Our Community's, Our Nation's Legacy

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. —

“There are many reason why I would be gladly excused from appearing before the pubic in the attitude of self-defense. But while there are times when such defense is a privilege to be exercised or omitted at the pleasure of the party assailed, there are other times and circumstances when it becomes a duty which cannot be omitted without the imputation of cowardice or of conscious guilt. This is especially true in a case where the charges vitally affect one's standing with the people and government of one's country. In such case a man must defend himself, if only to demonstrate his fitness to defend anything else. In discharging this duty, I shall acknowledge no favoritism to men in high places, no restraint but candor, and no limitation but truth. It is easy to whip a man when his hands are tied...” —Frederick Douglas

Who is Muhammad Ali? The answer depends on whom you ask. Responses might include the People's Champ, the Greatest (boxer of all time), Athlete of the Century, or the Louisville Lip. Still arguably the most recognizable face in the world, Ali's instantaneous recognition is bound to come with a measure of controversy. But the question is rightfully posed in the present tense, for none of us are simply who we were.

The question brings to mind the familiar banter exchanged between legendary sportscaster the late Howard Cosell and Ali, when Cosell in his trademark drawl, remarked “Muhammad, some say you're not the man you used to be,” and Ali quips, “Well Howard, I talked to your wife and she said, you're not the man you used to be two minutes ago!”

Our exposure to popular culture may predispose us to forming a caricature based on image rather than seeking to know the true measure of a man, for it is certainly not flesh that defines us. We are a glimpse of the past, a clear reflection of the present and promising portrait of the future that includes our hopes and dreams.

In a society that almost worships youth, and forgets that age is a natural consequence of time, a friend we should welcome that signals transition, the period of repose and that Promised Meeting, it is helpful to change the context of what is the measure of a person.

For the correct context, I rely upon another great man, our leader Imam W. Deen Mohammed and his definition proclaiming: “*Man means mind,*” to help answer the question at hand. Within that context, we now go back for a glimpse of the past first to tell something of how Muhammad Ali became who he is today.

In 1942, Louisville, Kentucky was as segregated as any city in Alabama or Mississippi. It was in the Louisville of 1942 that Ali (then Cassius Marcellus Clay), was born the eldest of two children to Marcellus Clay, Sr., a muralist and sign painter, and Odessa Grady Clay, a domestic worker. Mrs. Clay was deeply spiritual, devoted to family and church. The Clays were members of Mount Zion Baptist Church. Ali and his younger brother Rahman, then Rudolph Valentino Clay, attended public schools, worshipped and had a relatively normal childhood, that is for an African-American witnessing the paradoxes of the beautiful Christian message on Sunday in contrast to the stark brutality of white supremacy on Monday. Something was amiss in America and in the souls of black folk, and Ali and his brother Rahman were no exception. In time, they would both reconcile the “inner disturbance” as a result of a new message of black pride, nationalism and spiritual consciousness that would help redefine America.

An unfortunate incident occurred one day when Ali was 12 years old. His bike was stolen. This initially negative event set into motion a chain of events that would create good fortune for Ali and his family, his community, his nation and the world. And therein lies the first clue of who Muhammad Ali is and what factors continue to shape his life and mission. The incident is also a lesson on dealing with loss or misfortune, for what we may perceive as unfortunate circumstance can by our response, our faith and G-d's Will, turn misfortune into an opportunity for success.

Undaunted and perhaps more than a bit angry, Ali vowed to “whup whoever stole it.” Now mind you, he was a scrawny kid at the time and had no idea how big the perpetrator was. Fortunately he was guided to channel his energy differently by the late Joe Elsbey Martin, a local police officer, who told Ali, ‘you can't whup nobody

until you learn how to fight.' One has to admire this policeman who took this young black youth under his tutelage in segregated Louisville, not I believe to teach him how to fight to recover a bike. No, Joe Martin knew something about this young man, and about every young man; that guidance and discipline over anger would equip him to handle the biggest enemy—one's self and in doing so, maybe, just maybe, a young man can change the world. Martin had begun to prepare Ali for the time when justified anger directed at external circumstances would have to give way to greater personal responsibility to change circumstances. Ali had to trust. Martin had to care. Working together, their relationship unveiled what had previously been hidden, a brilliant athleticism that with time created near perfection in the ring. What also developed was discipline. But everything has a price. Ali's devotion to his craft created weakness in the classroom and he struggled as a slow reader most of his life. Famous for his gift of gab, poetic license and lightening sharp tongue, he more than compensated for his weakness. Like a blind man whose hearing becomes sharp, he turned to his strength: the spoken word, and redefined the business of promotion. Ali as the consummate provocateur understood the power of television and captured the heart of his admirers and also the ire of his enemies. Another clue presents. Ali shows himself early as a man keenly aware of his weaknesses, yet never yielding. Instead he disciplines himself to rely on his strengths. Whatever your dream, say it enough and it can happen. Believe it, visualize it, commit to it and it will happen (by the Grace of G-d).

Between 1955 and 1960, Ali fought in 108 bouts, won six Kentucky Golden Gloves titles and two National Crowns, and then he became one of the world's top elite athletes as an Olympic Boxing Champion taking the gold for the light heavyweight division in the Summer Olympics Games held in Rome, Italy. By this time, he had begun to exhibit that greatness and a special style wherein he danced gracefully across the ring, effortlessly slipping an opponent's punch with his hands down while firing shots and getting out before his opponent saw him coming. He was a poet in motion, an artist discovering all the physics of his canvas.

In October of 1960, Ali entered the ring as a professional boxer. After 18 consecutive victories, in February 1964, the same month as the Nation of Islam's Savior's Day gathering, he would be catapulted securely onto the world stage from then on following his prediction and fulfillment of a seventh round knockout of the "invincible" champ of that time, Sonny Liston, and he would make quicker work of Liston again a year later. Ali had already been proclaiming that he would be world heavyweight champion when he was only ranked nine on the list of contenders. It was a stunning victory when at 22 years of age he became the Heavyweight Champion of the World. What Ali had accomplished inside the ring was news enough, but it was something occurring outside the ring that helped to shake up America and the world. Cassius Marcellus Clay went into the ring that night and emerged victorious as Muhammad Ali.

Seven rounds and the world had suddenly changed. It was not simply a heavy weight boxing match in 1964. Ali's win not as Cassius, but as Muhammad was a metaphor for what was happening in and outside of America. Just a year earlier, the world witnessed Bull Connor's brutality of water cannons and attack dogs unleashed upon innocent African American protestors in the "citadel of blind, die-hard segregation," the old Birmingham, Alabama. Two juxtaposed remedies for Black America's plight were front and center, the Civil Rights Movement with Dr. King and the black nationalists typified by Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam, the Panthers and others. Veteran newscaster Mike Wallace along with Louis Lomax had already introduced America to the Nation of Islam through a documentary called, "The Hate That Hate Produced." The title itself was foreboding.

Internationally, the winds of freedom and independence were brushing across Africa as she began to break free from colonial domination. And then there was a war in Southeast Asia in a country called Vietnam. It was in this highly charged mix of events, that Ali came to the world stage, a man who would be shaped by the time and events...another clue. We are all shaped by the times and events. What distinguishes one man from the next is where he stands in times of controversy as Dr. King eloquently reminded us. During times of great controversy, one's destiny is not only shaped by time and events, but reciprocally, the times and events can be shaped by one's destiny. Those who are the greatest examples of such reciprocity are on the plane of the Prophets, G-d's Messengers. But G-d also forms messengers from you or me, W. Deen Mohammed or a Muhammad Ali. We just have to listen to what is inside.

The dissonance stirring in Ali's soul, though perhaps temporarily quelled by the victory in Rome in 1960 had to have been stirred mightily again when he returned to a segregated Louisville as America's representative wearing his gold medal, only to be turned away at a local diner because of his race. His co-Olympian, the late Wilma Rudolph, said at the time, "I can still see him strutting around the Olympic Village with his gold medal on. He slept with it. He went to the cafeteria with it. He never took it off. No one cherished it the way he did." It must

have been a decisive moment for sure when Ali incensed with the emotions of the incident, threw his medal into the Ohio River.¹

By 1964, Ali's life had certainly been paradoxical. Time and again the same town where he learns racism up close and personal, is the same town that offers him opportunity, for it is the Louisville Sponsoring Group, a millionaire roundtable of twelve local white business leaders, who sign him to the most lucrative professional contract—a 50-50 split—negotiated by a beginner in the history of boxing. Within four years after turning professional, he is introduced to the Nation of Islam. Shortly before the Liston fight, reporters in Miami had seen Ali in the company of late Nation of Islam Minister Malcolm X (later Al Hajj Malik El Shabazz). The rumors are rampant that Ali has become a Black Muslim. What the system couldn't take was that the rumors were true.

Muhammad Ali didn't just embrace his new found identity as a Muslim quietly either. He broadcasted it. Donning the blue and white military uniform of the Nation of Islam, he proclaimed at its Savior's Day Convention, now that I am the heavy weight champion, I can go all over the world and help Islam. He was seen in the ring praying, thanking Allah and greeting Elijah Muhammad (and later W. Deen Mohammed) and the Muslim Community on nationwide and international television. He even insisted he be called by his Muslim name and not his "slave name." Unfortunately he punished some opponents for failing the respect test when they continued to use Cassius. At the same time, soulful singer James Brown's familiar refrain, "Say it loud, I'm black and I'm proud," soon became like a pop anthem to American Blacks and many people of color around the world who had been told and believed that they were inferior because of their ethnic features and complexion. James Brown attributed the inspiration for his lyric to the late Honorable Elijah Muhammad. And just like the Godfather of Soul, Ali, also inspired by Elijah, was singing the anthem in his way, for when he grabbed a comb before water after a boxing match, primping his hair and proclaiming, "ain't I beautiful," whether intentionally or unintentionally, I like to think the former, he was saying all of us are pretty. He inspired us all with self-confidence and self-respect...an obvious clue. Ali said of himself, "I shook up the world...Um' pretty...Um' a bad man." No doubt, he was a bad man inside the ring, but more importantly he was becoming a pretty courageous leader outside the ring. And the world took notice, including America and the American government. He would soon need all the courage and self-confidence he could muster to face one of his greatest trials.

In the sixties, the number of professional, prominent Muslim athletes could be counted on two fingers, basketball great Karriem Abdul Jabbar, formerly Lou Alcindor, and Ali. Jabbar was not a member of the Nation of Islam. In the 2004 Olympics in Athens, Bahrain's Rakia al-Gassra, Palestine's Sanna Abubkheet and Somalia's Fartun Abukar Omar among others made history as the first Muslim women athletes in the Olympics. Today in the NFL or NBA, it is not uncommon to see Muslim names on team jerseys. Even amongst the general population, Muslim names are commonly given to children now by their parents who may not claim Islam as their religion.

Great change has happened in the last fifty years with more persons rediscovering history and knowing the positive influence of Al-Islam on many cultures and peoples including the ancestors of America's former slaves. But change has not come without a price. There are many unsung heroes in our Muslim Community who were persecuted for calling themselves Muslim and openly proclaiming their Islamic identity, none more publicly than Muhammad Ali. His joining the Nation of Islam and becoming increasingly vocal on social and political issues affecting Black America, did him no favors with the establishment. He was loathed by most of white America. But there was also a disdain and perhaps fear by a certain portion of blacks consisting mainly of the elite and the growing new middle class precariously securing new found social, political and financial freedoms. Ali was black, wealthy and famous. Why couldn't he just be happy and keep his mouth shut. Those thoughts filtered through hushed tones may have expressed a concern that Ali might cast a shadow of suspicion over black folk who had made it, not to mention the millions isolated in impoverished ghettos. Were they all plotting to become Black Muslim and join the Nation? There had to be some great consternation and not so mild paranoia going on in America as to how long a people suffering under a system of racial discrimination that was an equal opportunity insult and threat for all Blacks, regardless of religion, income or social status, how long could they wait for change. During the weeks leading up to the first Liston fight, both Ali and the Brown Bomber, the late great Joe Louis, could not get into hotels in the city of Miami. By what route would change come? Change was in the wind, but America was still firmly between a rock and a hard place. Ali proved to be one of those rocks.

When the hot Texas sun rose on Houston in April 1967, the morning's temperature belied the heat that was stirring among protestors outside a military processing center and the escalating tension inside. Dozens of young males had passed through the Armed Forces Station to undergo the rituals of pre-military indoctrination. Among the potential new draftees was Ali who had previously been disqualified from military service three years

earlier. Now the moment was at hand for Ali to answer the then familiar draft ritual of stepping forward after hearing one's name called followed by the branch of service. One by one, the men prior to Ali stepped forward after hearing their name called. Ali refused to move again and again as the commissioned officer exclaimed, "Cassius Clay...Army!" How many a man firm of purpose supported by resolute intention at the very moment of decision have buckled and succumbed to voices of doubt and the fear of consequences? All in one moment, events both past and present converged to very publicly place one man directly at odds with one of the world's two superpowers. Twelve years earlier the late heroine Rosa Parks was arrested taking a stand for justice by quietly remaining in her bus seat sparking the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the ushering in of new leadership in a charismatic young Baptist minister named Martin King, Jr. As a young boy Ali witnessed the dark murals of white and colored over the fountains, the raw ugliness of racism along with the taunts of n-g--r. He like an entire generation, saw the face of the murdered child Emmett Till horribly disfigured from a brutal act of hatred. Ali, only a year younger than Emmett, was deeply affected by his murder. The murder followed by the not guilty verdict handed down by an all-white jury must have devastated any shred of surety that parents could protect their children or themselves from the physical effects of racism. What was Ali thinking in the instance that he refused induction? Just a year earlier, the Supreme Court handed down the landmark ruling *Brown v. Board of Education* and many parts of the country were in turmoil over this death knell to segregation. The country was still recovering from the loss of a beloved President John F. Kennedy. Reader's Digest had described Elijah Muhammad as the most powerful Black man in America. No doubt the FBI's co-intel pro surveillance and strategic plans to weaken black leaders across the board, civil rights or nationalists, were in full gear. Inside Ali's religious community, the Nation of Islam was recovering from the public feud and split between Malcolm and Elijah both of whom impacted Ali's understanding of race and religion. The split and later assassination of Malcolm by alleged rouge elements within the Nation tore at Ali's soul. Malcolm's and Ali's children had played together.

Ali was not the only one to suffer. The New York Mosque was firebombed and its new leader, Louis Farrakhan, was assigned to help rebuild the community locally and nationally as its spokesman and successor to Malcolm. While most of the Community stayed in tact, some believers left for more orthodox Islam inspired by Malcolm. Outsiders like the late Senator Al Gore, Sr. held hearings on alleged un-American activities denouncing the Nation of Islam.

It is also of great significance to Ali and the rest of the Community that Imam Wallace D. Mohammed returned to the Nation of Islam in 1965, for despite the differences with his father's teaching on race and religion that would see him expelled from the Nation twice in 1969 and 1971, it was Wallace who held the keys to transition the Community from a racist, separatist, quasi-religious movement to a true, globally respected Muslim Community with sober intelligence following the Qur'an and the life example of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be upon him) as practiced by peace loving Muslims the world over. 1967 was a tumultuous time for Ali and his family, for a community and for a nation.

Standing on the induction line, Ali could not have known where Elijah's Nation of Islam was headed, much less be cognizant of the dramatic shift that would occur just eight years later with the death of its leader. But he believed in Elijah, his teacher who had given him his name and he believed in the Nation who like the Viet Cong did not call him a n-g--r. There were signs that Ali would however be among the first to embrace true Islam under the leadership of Imam Mohammed, because despite his race rhetoric, he showed his love for people and enjoyed a special bond with the great Angelo Dundee, his trainer, even though the Nation applied pressure for him to fire Dundee because he was white. Ali made lots of exceptions to his race policy.

By the time the sun set in Houston on April 28, 1967, Ali had joined the ranks of his teachers, Elijah Muhammad who was wrongly convicted in 1942 for draft evasion and Imam Mohammed wrongfully convicted ten years after his father for conscientiously objecting to the draft as a minister. There were in fact many Muslims convicted and sentenced as conscientious objectors in the Nation of Islam's history. But Ali was different. He could have compromised and took the chance that he likely would have served in the military as a morale booster, guaranteed easier duty in a non-combat role entertaining troops, much like Joe Louis or his friend and music legend the late Elvis Presley had done.

Before the tense moment at induction and shortly before learning he had been reclassified for the draft, Ali was quoted in the press about the Vietnam War, "I ain't got no quarrel with no Viet Cong. No Viet Cong ever called me n-g--r." America boiled over. Sports Illustrated's Jack Olsen recounting the period states, "Patriotic boxing fans and sports journalists participated in a tremendous outcry against him. The noise became a din, the drumbeats of a holy war. Television and radio commentators, little old ladies—bookmakers and parish priests,

armchair strategists at the Pentagon and politicians all over the place joined in a crescendo of get-Cassius clamor.” Things were about to get a lot worse before it got better.

While Ali’s words stung most of America and heralded the beginning of a growing outcry against U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia, he alone would face the political might of the U.S. military and the courts of law and public opinion. The executive branch did not need to weigh in; it was lead prosecutor for the war effort. Nevertheless, Ali said enough is enough. There would be no compromise. He would take a stand upon faith for his religious conviction and just as important, stand for the dignity of African Americans who were being mistreated at home. Ali was more than objecting conscientiously, he was absolutely drawing the line as he fired a volley of powerful charges indicting America and its leadership, *“I ain't draft dodging. I ain't burning no flag. I ain't running to Canada. I'm staying right here. You want to send me to jail? Fine, you go right ahead. I've been in jail for 400 years. I could be there for 4 or 5 more, but I ain't going no 10,000 miles to help murder and kill other poor people. If I want to die, I'll die right here, right now, fightin' you, if I want to die. You my enemy, not no Chinese, no Vietcong, no Japanese. You my opposer when I want freedom. You my opposer when I want justice. You my opposer when I want equality. Want me to go somewhere and fight for you? You won't even stand up for me right here in America, for my rights and my religious beliefs. You won't even stand up for my right here at home.”* In retrospect today, he says faith saw him through, “None of it bothered me at all,” he says, “G-d was with me.”

Ali reasoned that others before him had taken a stand, with some making the ultimate sacrifice. Another writer describing the circumstances put it this way, “...the opprobrium that greeted Ali’s decision was almost other worldly, a potent brew of naked racism, angry jingoism, and a weird xenophobic spasm at the public injunction of such a foreign and, to many, frightening religion.”² At one time, hostility toward his stance and religion reportedly led to Ali’s phones being tapped and the federal government regarding him as a threat to national security.

The consequences came swiftly and severely. In the prime of his professional career, the 29-year old champion was convicted a month later by an all-white jury of six men and six women, fined \$10,000, given a prison term of five years, stripped of his license and means of livelihood, and finally stripped of his crown as the heavyweight champion of the world. The best news, he was freed on \$5,000 bail pending appeal.

Make no mistake, the period following Ali’s conviction was a very difficult one for him and his family. But the darkest hours would not last forever as the history is already written. Ali held firm in faith telling one reporter, “I’m giving up my title, my wealth, maybe my future. Many great men have been tested for their religious beliefs. If I pass this test, I’ll come out stronger than ever.” Ali’s words reverberate like a prophetic pronouncement. Just as he had predicted the rounds and final outcomes in the ring, he had believed that G-d would deliver him at the courts. Even without the participation of the late Honorable Thurgood Marshal, who had been at the Justice Department when Ali was prosecuted, in an 8-0 decision, the Supreme Court overturned Ali’s conviction stating that “The First Amendment means at the very least that the government cannot, because of a dislike of religious doctrines, deny to the followers of one religion what it accords to adherents of others.” It was a monumental ruling that set Ali free, and helped establish Islam as a respected religion in America, even if it was not being properly taught and practiced by Ali and his fellow Muslims until the great reformation that began in 1975. If there is ever a return to the draft, local draft boards must reflect the demographics of their district...another legacy of Muhammad Ali. Ali’s life story was firmly fixed on the most salient pages of world history, beloved around the world as a true hero and fighter outside the ring. He had yet to become an even bigger sports legend as a three-time heavyweight champion of the world.

With legal matters resolved, Muhammad Ali was free to return to the ring and eager to regain the crown from a worthy opponent, Smokin’ Joe Frazier. Ali lost the first battle, but won the epic boxing war with Frazier in two subsequent matches, that were defining moments in an impressive career spanning more than 21 years with 56 wins and 5 losses. Taking fight venues to lesser known places in the developing world further endeared Ali to millions more people around the globe and brought attention and hope to the plight of the Third World. Faraway places like Kinshasa Zaire, Africa (Democratic Republic of the Congo) and Manila in the Philippines was as familiar to America as New York and Los Angeles.

The Ali before conviction was not the same Ali three years later. He was still fast, but age and time quickly chase professional athletes. The famous foot work of the Ali Shuffle would have to be modified. Ali adapted his style employing the famous rope-a-dope on heavy puncher, George Foreman. One of the familiar catch phrases, “Your hands can’t hit what your eyes can’t see,” years ago might have been replaced in the Foreman fight with, “hit me ‘til your tired, then you’ll get fired.” Not as good as Ali, but it does capture the

strategy of the rope-a-dope. It is believed that the devastating punches Ali absorbed in fights particularly with Foreman, Frazier and at the end of his boxing career against Larry Holmes and Trevor Berbick produced the degenerative neurological symptoms of Parkinson's disease. It would become Ali's most formidable opponent taking away the voice that could not be silenced in the ring, in front of the camera, or even before the Supreme Court of the United States. The voice that captivated a nation and the world would fall silent, but alas not unheard. And what of his naysayers? Well, history speaks loudly for him.

Many clues have been given to the question that began our glimpse into the past. Now we return to the life of Muhammad Ali since Parkinson's to the present. Despite the debilitating effects of Parkinson's, Muhammad Ali remains dedicated to his mission of doing all he can, while he can, for the sake of Allah (SWT).¹ He needs no pity. His life is full of love with his wife and children and his work. Today championing the needs of the developing world has become a major focus of his life. From goodwill missions in Afghanistan and North Korea, to delivering sorely needed supplies to an embargoed Cuba, Ali finds the time, energy, and fortitude to serve his fellow man. His works have touched Iraq in the freeing of hostages and South Africa on a benevolent mission upon the release of former President Mandela. Stateside, Ali has visited countless soup kitchens and hospitals and assisted numerous organizations from adoption agencies to the Special Olympics to children infected with AIDS. In addition, he continues to support the Muhammad Ali Parkinson Research Center at Barrow Neurological Institute in Phoenix. His prolific dawah efforts are as legendary as his boxing record as he is seen constantly given away thousands of autographed books and pamphlets on Al-Islam. How many a heart has he encouraged to a better understanding of Islam or encouraged others to understand better their own religion—and then to live it? With the opening of the Muhammad Ali Center in Louisville, his dawah efforts become part of a lasting legacy.

Who is Muhammad Ali today? He is me and you. He is Muslim, a servant of Allah (SWT), not perfect, invincible or forever young. He has however defied the equation that trap too many into failing to unleash the greatness within themselves. The equation goes something like this: Idealism is prominent when we are in our youth when perhaps wisdom is not. And when we age we have all the wisdom but idealism is naught. Whereas in our youth we might have asked why not. And in our aged wisdom we may say why or not ask at all. The greatness of Muhammad Ali and the key to our own greatness, is to see the ideal, no matter the age, time or obstacle. To see the gold under the dross and then work to reveal the precious substance lying just beneath the surface that with a little guidance, patience, trust, dedication, conviction and faith, one might just shake up the world.

¹ Whether the loss of the medal occurred in this manner or not, as it was later recounted the medal was simply lost, the symbol of Ali losing the medal is what resonates. Losing the medal is not as much physical as it is symbolic of the loss the Champ must have felt in returning to a racist Louisville, Kentucky from the Rome Olympics. He was presented a replacement medal in Atlanta by the President of the International Olympic Committee in 1996.

² "Muhammad Ali Fought With His Fists and His Words," *U.S. News & World Report*: Aug. 20-27, 2001.