

# Malcolm X

## The Baba and Husband

Malcolm X, also known as El Hajj Malik El Shabazz, looms as possibly the most influential figure amongst politically conscious African Americans nearly 40 years after his death. Particularly among brothers of all ages, his story of rebirth and self-definition offers a promise for many. At the peak of his popularity, audiences were still surprised that the impressively educated and articulated man was once an ex-convict; having educated himself by dedicating himself to read the dictionary in prison and committing to an exhaustive course of self-study.

While his role as a political and social leader have been widely researched, far less attention is paid to Malcolm X the husband and father. He married Betty Shabazz and the two were blessed with six daughters. Malcolm never saw his youngest daughters (twins), who were born after his assassination on February 21, 1965. His daughters were sometimes treated as near royalty, as expectations for them was often unreasonably high, particularly for children who barely knew, if at all, their famous father. His third oldest daughter, Ilyasah Shabazz, published Growing Up X this year, which chronicles her life and the weight of having to carry her father's legacy.

Years before her unfortunate passing (the result of a fire begun by her grandson, named Malcolm), Betty Shabazz wrote a wonderful article in *Essence* about her relationship with her husband. Her tremendous admiration however didn't obscure problem in their marriage.



Malcolm had very little time for his family. At the time of his assassination his daughters were approximately 7, 5, 3, and 1. Alex Haley, who penned his autobiography, purchased two dolls for his oldest daughters for Christmas. Malcolm was excited to see the dolls (African dolls who could walk). "You know," he said to Alex Haley, "this isn't something I'm proud to say, but I don't think I've ever bought one gift

for my children. Everything they play with, either Betty got it for them, or somebody gave it to them, never me. That's not good, I know it. I've always been too busy."

He understood that the life he chose required a unique woman. In his autobiography he wrote that his wife "... understands me. I would even say I don't imagine many other women might put with the way I am. Awakening

this brainwashed black man and telling this arrogant, devilish white man the truth about himself, Betty understands, is a full-time job."

His work as a national spokesperson for the Nation of Islam, and later as the founder of the Organization for Afro-American Unity consumed his waking hours. It seems his time spent at home rarely involved playing aimlessly with his daughter. "If I have work to do when I am home the little time I am at home," he wrote, he wife "lets me have the quiet I need to work in. I'm rarely at home more than half of any week." During some years he was away from home five months out of the year.

A date was a very rare occasion for the couple. Malcolm wrote, "I never get much chance to take her anywhere, and I know she likes to be with her husband." His schedule didn't afford much "quality time", and they spent a considerable time speaking on the phone. She became accustomed to receiving calls from Malcolm from the airport. It was his way of letting her know that she was always on his mind. During

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one of these phone calls, she remarked to him "You are present when you are away."

It was a wonderful, and heartfelt statement, but apparently didn't diffuse her frustrations at his absences. On two occasions they were separated. After one trip he returned to an empty home - she had taken the children and left.

He promised he would make a greater effort to spend time with his family. "We'll be together," he promised her. "I want my family with me. Families shouldn't be separated. I'll never make another long trip without you. We'll get somebody to keep the children. I'll never leave you so long again." Shortly thereafter, he was taken from us all.

Those who have studied his life, praise his life's commitment to our people's liberation. But we must also remain mindful of the enormous sacrifice his family paid. It falls to this generation to continue his work, but in a way that does not elevate the community, while diminishing our families.

