



**BLACK WOMEN, MEN AND HIV/AIDS:  
SHARED RESPONSIBILITY IN LOVE, LIFE AND STRUGGLE**

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**DR. MAULANA KARENGA**

**T**HIS YEAR AS WE AGAIN OBSERVE THE DAYS set aside to mark and remind us of both the tragic passing and praiseworthy endurance of victims of HIV/AIDS among us, we, of necessity, continue to search for solutions, i.e., how to increase prevention, ensure treatment and care, expand education, reduce and end high risk and reckless behavior, and encourage everyone to engage in practices to save lives, promote health and secure well-being and flourishing for us all. And that search, wherever else it takes us, always leads us back to ourselves. For the effective confrontation and curing of this horrible human epidemic, so devastating to us as African people all over the world, ultimately depends on us, regardless of the medical discoveries, so-called magic pills, advised regimens, available services and other interventions. That is to say, it depends on what we do in relations of shared responsibility in love, life and struggle, to save and secure our lives, improve our life conditions and above all, strengthen our relations among ourselves and thus, our capacity to work and struggle together tirelessly to achieve our goals.

Indeed, the hub and hinge on which the whole of human existence turns is relations at every level of life. It is in relationship that we come into being, learn to love, care, be kind, to assist and share in things good, right and beautiful, and to speak our special truth, strive upward, work, struggle, heal ourselves, do good in the world, and come into the fullness of ourselves. And it is in relations that we learn and experience the opposite, i.e., things that harm, hurt, damage, deform, diminish and destroy. That is why we say in Kawaïda, the good and bad, right and wrong, benefit and harm of anything can be determined by the kind of relations and relationships it creates, supports and sustains.

Clearly, a critical point and place of confrontation, cure, and struggle is in the conception and practice of sex, for it is here that HIV/AIDS has found a central site of life for itself and offers a disabling and destruction for us. But sex is not

done in isolation with no prior thought and practice. It evolves out of ideas, assumptions, attitudes and previous practices, all rooted in kinds of relations and relationships. And these either cause us to respect ourselves and our partners and engage in dignity-affirming, life-preserving and life-enhancing practices or mindlessly throw caution and care to the wind and wild, and do dignity-denying, life-endangering and life-destructive things.

Our best relations are always those which recognize, respect and put into conscious practice a shared responsibility to build the good and reciprocal relations and world we all want and deserve. Responsibility in relations is always a moral responsibility, an obligation and duty to do what is good, right and beautiful. And it is with this understanding and orientation that we must engage in ongoing efforts to achieve an ethical, just and effective solution to the HIV/AIDS crisis.

Certainly, our efforts must be rooted in and begin with respect for ourselves and each other, as our sacred texts teach us, as possessors of dignity and divinity, worthy of the highest moral consideration and concern. This essentially means that we must be constantly concerned about how we relate and treat each other; doing things that demonstrate care, concern and consideration and not doing things which violate, devalue or harm each other. And this refers also and equally to how we respect ourselves, i.e., not only not allowing others to disrespect us, but also not doing things that violate, devalue and degrade ourselves.

Moreover, we must embrace and root our thought, emotion, speech and conduct in moral values which are dignity-affirming, life-preserving and life-enhancing. Self-respect and respect of others are based on recognition and appreciation of each person's dignity. Thus, our values must reaffirm this dignity, and keep us away from practices in life and sex that degrade and demean us and violate the sacredness of our persons. And

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our essential values must also be those that preserve and enhance human life, our lives, and thus, those that enjoin us to avoid reckless, high risk, dangerous and self-destructive practices, and stress and strengthen our physical, psychological and spiritual health, wholeness, well-being and flourishing as persons and a people.

Also, we must make and keep commitments, commitments of life, love, respect, sharing, building, work and struggle. There is no real love, life or struggle without real commitments, those which are also kept in our hearts, minds and spirit, and practiced as a promise earnestly made and joyfully honored. For our commitments are reliable evidence and expressions of who we are and the reciprocal relationships we want and deserve. They are, thus, a sign and practical proof of our trustworthiness or reliability and the standards we have set and maintained, not only for others, but also for ourselves.

Furthermore, there is a need to refrain from a basic list of perverse, harmful, destructive and counterproductive practices which create conditions clearly negative to health, wholeness and well-being. First, we must reject all forms of violence and coercion—physical, psychological and sexual. In other words, we must rid ourselves of all tendencies and acts of physical attacks and threats, psychological assaults, degradation and coercion, and sexual violence of rape, aggression and rough, injurious, dangerous and degrading practices during sex. This means men must reject violence in all relations and women must refuse to accept it as normal, necessary or curable simply with apologies from him and accommodation from her. And men must stop predatory

and wrongful sexual relations with young girls and boys who are vulnerable for a host of reasons and conditions—naiveté, homelessness, deception, prior abuse, misplaced conceptions of love and need, coercion, peer pressure, etc.

**A**ND WE MUST, AS MEN, STOP WEARING THE many masks which temporarily and only partially hide who we are. We must be open and honest about who we are sexually and fully. This means those who do it, must quit the self-concealment and making excuses for hiding information and engaging in practices that endanger, harm and destroy lives, and they must *get the test, tell the truth and take the medicine*. And yes, we must stop the stigmatizing, the signifying, side-mouthing, discrimination and condemnations against persons of various sexualities and sexual orientations and see all of us as sisters and brothers engaged in a life and death struggle to heal, repair and rebuild ourselves and our community in the process and practice of seeking justice and repairing and remaking the world. For the illness and epidemic we struggle against is not just HIV/AIDS and related issues of ill-health, but also the pathology of a racist and oppressive society which affects and infects us also. As Fanon reminds us, the problem of health is not only a problem of medicine, but also one of oppression and can only be ultimately solved in the emancipatory and self-empowering process and practice of transformative struggle, internal and external. Thus, as we say in Kawaiida; if not this, then what? And if we don't do it, who will? The answer is obvious, the need is urgent and the path forward is plain and unavoidable. ▲

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