



**COMMEMORATING LOSS, CHERISHING LIFE:
US, HIV/AIDS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Each year we mark and find great value and meaning in commemorating World AIDS Day, December 1, for it is good and right to remember and pay homage to the millions whose lives have been lost to this the deadliest and most destructive disease of our time. The value and meaning of this day and week of commemoration lies also in its offering another time to reaffirm our commitment to care for those living with HIV/AIDS, to ease and end their suffering, reinforce their courage and resilience and to continue the struggle to achieve that “AIDS-free generation” we all want, hope and work for. And this time of remembrance and reflection also reminds us to cherish and choose life over and against the ways and wares of death proposed and peddled daily in society as well as sex.

This year marks the 30th year since the alarming appearance and relentless assault of HIV/AIDS, whose record of ravage and ruin worldwide includes 30 million deaths and 64 million infections since first reported. It also includes 34 million remaining with AIDS and 15 million with HIV, most of these among our people in Africa with an increasingly rising rate among African American women, gay and bisexual men, and young adults. Surely, the sheer destructiveness of the disease, its worldwide reach and its rapid and ruthless spread cause us to reflect, not only on the medical inadequacies and problems it exposed, but also the social, class and racial issues and inequities it has raised and revealed. Indeed, in dealing with this pandemic, we have learned a lot about the disease, but also much about ourselves as well as others.

In the beginning, HIV/AIDS was quickly conceived as a “gay disease” unde-

serving of urgent attention, let alone compassionate concern for its victims. But the disease did not make such distinctions and eventually compelled both a massive public health intervention as well as an *ethical re-thinking* and response. The first lesson learned and relearned, then, is from an ancient African ethical teaching found in the *Husia* that every issue and act in human relations is an *ethical one* and requires uncompromising respect of every person as a *possessor of dignity and divinity*. Thus, whether in matters of health and healing, decisions of life and death or daily encounters and exchanges, respect for the dignity and rights of every human being is the fundamental anchor and source of orientation for all righteous and rightful human relations.

We learned too on this rough and casualty-ridden journey of sickness, suffering and undeserved deaths on which HIV/AIDS have taken us, that AIDS is not an indiscriminate killer; race remains real; and class cannot be counted out on who lives and dies from this disease. Thus, we have moved from certain death for all victims of the disease to now reprieve for those most able to access, afford and adhere to the regimen of medication developed to combat HIV/AIDS. The rich, racially favored and socially well-situated do not receive death sentences and are not sitting on death row either in the medical or social sense. But those less capable and most vulnerable live with the possibility of death and disease every day.

This takes us inevitably to another hard learned and relearned lesson, that we are our own liberators in life, our own ultimate healers in health, and our own principal and primary hope for an “AIDS free generation”

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and the social justice and self-strengthening struggle needed to achieve this. In a word, we must take primary responsibility for our healing and health. And part of our responsibility to ourselves is to hold others accountable, to encourage and compel allies and opponents to accept the social responsibility for a people-centered health delivery system that respects the rights and dignity of all persons and peoples and moves beyond the corporate concern for costs and profits at the expense of human health and human life.

We have learned also the value, resourcefulness and indispensability of a culturally rooted, culturally informed and culturally competent approach to deal effectively and successfully with this pandemic and the crisis it has caused in our community. Indeed, strategies and policies developed in Washington or West Hollywood without our effective input never work well, no matter how good the intentions. Recognizing this, Tony Wafford, CEO of "I Choose Life" and I, Executive Director of the African American Cultural Center, as well as many others working in the HIV/AIDS projects, formed the National Black HIV/AIDS Strategy Alliance, to address this issue, develop and demand culturally sound holistic initiatives, and to cooperatively struggle for rightfully due resources and Black people's rightful place at the table, in the research process and every other critical space in this struggle.

Finally, we have learned and relearned how much we as persons and a people mean to each other, how fragile and fraught with vulnerabilities our lives are and how much we need each other's love and loving-

kindness, care, concern and constant support. And we need these signs of our worth and worthiness of love and life, not only in times of great crises, but also in the small, and yet important, dealings and decisions of our daily life which, rightly made, lead to the good, but wrongfully done, can have deadly and disastrous consequences. Thus, we must be for each other support, sanctuary and safety net—support for the right and the good, sanctuary against the hurtful and harmful, and safety net for those of us who stumble, fall or fail to walk the high ground.

My philosophy, *Kawaida*, teaches that we, as a people, are *injured physicians*, who must heal and repair ourselves in the process of healing and repairing the world. Certainly, this disease and centuries of oppression have wounded, and, in some places, weakened us, but we are not undone or defeated. For we are physicians with the knowledge, skill, human durability and adaptive vitality necessary to heal ourselves in the process and practice of healing society and the world.

Gwen Brooks, one of our greatest poets, advises us in this moment of remembrance, reflection and moving forward, saying: "My People, Black and Black, revile the River/Say that the River turns and turn the River." Recognize "the coming hell and health together" and "Prepare to meet (sisters and brothers) the brash and terrible weather, the pains/the bruising, the collapse of bestial idols." But regardless of the circling chaos and evil, let us choose life and flourish. For she says, "This is the urgency! Live and have your blooming in the (whip and) noise of the whirlwind."

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