



**CHOOSING LIFE IN AN ERA OF HIV/AIDS:
REJECTING SILENCE, SELF-DECEPTION & DEATH**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 12-04-08, p. A-7

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

Clearly, HIV/AIDS is one of the defining issues of our era, a raging and relentless epidemic which places us at a precarious crossroads and crisis, and which challenges us to choose life and to reject the silence, self-deception, attitudes and actions that put too many of us on an unplanned path to certain and needless illness, disability and death. Indeed, HIV/AIDS is such a defining issue because of its global and relentless reach, the devastating and disorienting impact it has on us as an African people locally, nationally and on a world scale, and its interconnectedness with a host of related problems of community and society. These include poverty, poor health, inadequate or no health coverage, unemployment, homelessness, incarceration, drug use, stigmatizing and discrimination against gays, violence and coercion against women, racial discrimination and disregard from the larger society, and a pattern of attitudes and actions in general that are irresponsible, irrational and ethically untenable.

Thus, there is an urgent need for an inclusive, morally compelling and active commitment to turn things around. And the commitment must be to take up the multilateral task of prevention, treatment, care, support and social action on a personal and collective level and to work tirelessly to reduce and eventually end this scourge and horror for us and humankind. The annual observance of World AIDS Day, December 1, established by the World Health Organization and the UN General Assembly and National African American HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, February 7, signify the seriousness of the issue and struggle that

must be waged to combat HIV/AIDS to reduce and eventually end the terrible toll it takes on the lives of its victims and co-sufferers.

Certainly, no one has suffered or is suffering from this disease and its devastating effects as much as we are on a national, continental and world level as African people. And the statistics demonstrate its disproportionate impact on us as a people, families, men, women and children; straight and gay; young and old; ordinary and exceptional; the religious right and political left; and any and all in between. And yet the issue and presence of HIV/AIDS in the African American community, as regularly reported, is too often met with a costly and problematic mix of silence, self-deception, accidental and willful unawareness, continuing high risk and irresponsible behavior, and diversionary and ethically untenable reasoning from religious and rearguard sources both within and without our community.

Only a comprehensive conception and approach to this crisis and challenge confronting us will turn the tide, enable us to save and repair lives, and prevent transmission of a legacy of suffering and death from this disease to future generations. This means engaging HIV/AIDS not only as a health issue, but also as an ethical, cultural, political and communal issue. It is a health issue of needed wellness and well-being; an ethical issue of respect for ourselves and others as possessors of dignity and divinity in all our diversity and of our uncompromising commitment to end suffering; a cultural issue of putting forth and drawing from our best ideas, values and

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practices which affirm, preserve and enhance life; a political issue of struggling to end disparities and discrimination, secure funding and support, and address related problems; and it is a communal issue of building a combined effort of education, mobilization, organization and confrontation to achieve all this.

Around 734 B.C.E., Pharaoh Piankhi of Nubia returned to Egypt, as he explained it, to save it from itself, to end its fragmentation, disunity and vulnerability and launch a social, cultural and spiritual renaissance. He believed Egypt had within itself, the source of its own salvation, the medicine and physicians it required for its own healing and repair, and the thinkers, planners, craftpersons and builders to bring into being its own rebirth or renaissance. But it had to be united and its resources and capacities harnessed and directed towards a shared and common good.

Although he had come with an army to reestablish and extend Ma'at, a rightful and righteous order, as he understood it, he did not want to conquer the people but to win them over peacefully to avoid the devastation of war. Thus, outside the walls of the city of Memphis, he sent a message to the people of the city saying, "Behold, two ways are before you. You may choose as you wish. Open and you will live; close and you will die". Elsewhere he had said to the people, "Do not bar the gates of your life. Do not desire death and reject life". Instead, he urged them to choose life and build the good life they each and all deserved.

In this narrative, there are signs for those who want to see, lessons for those who want to learn, and a path of life for those

who want to pursue it. Our ancestors clearly call us to choose life, reject death and understand ourselves, especially on this issue, as ill and injured physicians who must heal themselves as they heal and repair the world. We are to avoid the closed mind and heart, narrow and negative notions of manhood, womanhood, sex, sexuality and rightful relationships. And we do this, not to lower or lose our own standards, but to expand and deepen our conceptions of what it means to be human, and to insure, by our own moral reasoning as persons and a people, that our understanding and approaches to life and living measure up to the best of African and human thought, sensitivity and practice.

Likewise, this teaching from our ancestors urges us to be ever open to learning and growth, to open up our minds and hearts, to think and feel in morally sensitive and expansive ways, to feel kinship and common interest in the good with our brothers and sisters, and to be open and eager to work and serve on their behalf, knowing it is also good for us as a whole. So let's move beyond silence and self-deception, reject the paths to certain and needless illness, disability and death. And let us choose life, a life of profound respect for ourselves and others, a life of courage to stand up in the midst of silence and self-deception and speak truth and seek justice for our people, and a life of a loving kindness that seeks the easing and ending of suffering and self-consciously strives to act always to bring good in the world. And as we say in Us—If not this, then what? And if we don't do it, who will?

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