



**DEFEATING HIV/AIDS:
THE PERPETUAL ACHIEVEMENT OF THE IMPOSSIBLE**

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DR. MAULANA KARENGA

As we marked this National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, we could not avoid noticing that the issue of HIV/AIDS has become less urgent on the country's agenda, that one of the once most vocal and active racial groups now has sufficient government monies, medicines and means to move on to advocate for other things, while real and potential Black victims are left to fend for themselves and make do or die on the remaining meager resources. For this is the way power and race work in this country and the world, in spite of self-deluding post-racial prattle and misconceptions about negotiation instead of struggle, and transactional trade without the power of an engaged people.

Indeed, it is the way the imperial and powerful imposed the category of "race" as opposed to "people" on us and the world, assigning peoples different human worth and social status and thus varying levels of worthiness of life, liberty and the possibilities of happiness and health care, according to "racial" color and racialized class. So, *it's up to us and comes down to this*, to what we ourselves will do, not only to deal with the issue and crisis of HIV/AIDS, but also the internal and external conditions which make us so vulnerable to this deadly disease and the destructive racial oppression imposed on us. For as we say in Kawaida, the oppressor is responsible for our oppression, but we are responsible for our liberation.

Here, there is no substitute for unity, awareness and active engagement in serving the needs of our people and in the process saving and strengthening ourselves. That is why *self-affirmation* is the first step we must take in standing up to do the work and wage the struggle necessary to defeat this disease and solve the problems on which it attaches

itself and feeds. This means we must self-consciously move from a language and logic of self- and community indictment and create a new dialog and discourse which affirms our strengths as a people, our struggles and our ongoing efforts and achievements against all odds.

It is not enough to discuss and denounce weaknesses, phobias, problems and negatives we actually find or feel exist among us. It is important also and a priority need to raise up and praise the strengths we have as a people, the acceptance of difference and diversity we do show, the problems we face and work to solve, and the negatives we struggle earnestly and every day to eliminate from our lives. For we must build on these positives, affirming the goodness in and of our people, the work and service so many of us are doing without adequate resources or any reward, except knowing it is good for those who need it. We have for 30 years seen what the broad-brush of name-calling and *racialized discourse of self-indictment* has done and failed to do. Now, let's see what challenging our people to bring forth the best of our culture, the ethical, resourceful, resilient and fruitful ways we've walked, worked and struggled for good in the world, can do.

Especially, must we affirm the highest values we have and hold in sacred trust from the ancestors who taught us good and beautiful ways to understand and assert ourselves in the world. These highest values of our community are rooted and reflected in our various faith traditions and call us to seek and speak truth, to do and demand justice, and to be kind, considerate and caring. And this kindness, considerateness and caring is to be extended not only to our family, friends and favorite people of various kinds, but also the

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vulnerable, i.e., the poor and needy, the ill, infant and elderly, the disabled, rejected and “least among us.”

From our own self-affirmation comes a need to practice the first principle of human relations, *respect for each and every human being as a possessor of dignity and divinity*, regardless of the many and varied social and biological attributes and identities people possess, assume or have imposed on them. In addition, we must embrace and practice an *ethics of both responsiveness and responsibility* to deal with this crisis and challenge called HIV/AIDS. The stress on *responsiveness* is an ethical emphasis on empathetic sensitivity to suffering for fellow human beings; heightened considerateness and concern for relatives, friends and community members; and loving kindness and care from a *hearing heart* that listens, feels, understands, and responds to suffering and need as a key aspect of our moral self-understanding as persons and a people.

Embracing *responsibility* as a principle and practice also means to be able and active in distinguishing right from wrong and acting accordingly, and acting morally and rationally in rightfully expected and obligatory ways. It means not simply having “safe” sex, but informed, dignity-affirming, self-respecting and other-respecting sex. It’s about practicing *Ujima*, collective work and responsibility for building the good community and world we want and deserve to live in, and about personal responsibility in seeking solutions, not only in medicine and miracle pills before

and after, but also in the way we conceive and conduct our lives, value our and others’ lives, make rightful choices, and act accordingly and accountably.

Finally, we must be *aware, organized and engaged in struggle* to transform ourselves, our community, society and ultimately the world. Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune is right—our overarching task is “to remake the world,” but we must do it in the process of remaking ourselves, our community and the society in which we find ourselves. And we must under any circumstances take responsibility for our own life and liberation from this disease, the STD’s that provide its ground in which to grow and expand, and the social conditions of oppression which undermine our capacity to live lives of well-being, health and human wholeness.

The naysayers will say we cannot turn this thing around, but those who know the awesome trajectory of our history know that, as Nannie Helen Burroughs said, “we specialize in the wholly impossible.” Indeed, James Baldwin, urging us in the 60s to forge ahead for freedom, justice and good in the world, regardless of the odds against us, reminded us of this ancient and ongoing self-understanding. He said, “I know that what I’m asking is impossible. But in our time, as in every time, the impossible is the least that one can demand—and one is after all emboldened by the spectacle of human history in general and (African American) history in particular, for it testifies to nothing less than the perpetual achievement of the impossible.”

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