



**HIV/AIDS, A FAMILY AFFAIR:
BEING SOURCES OF SERVICE, SUPPORT AND SANCTUARY**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 02-12-15, p.A-6

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THIS YEAR 6255 (2015) finds us once again observing National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day, which occurring on February 7th, takes place also in the context of Black History Month I, a time of deep and extended remembrance, reflection and recommitment. Let us, then, pause to pour libation in rightful and deserved remembrance of our relatives, friends, neighbors and fellow workers who lost their lives due to this horrible and deadly disease, HIV/AIDS. Let us also reflect on how we can aid the living who are well to avoid it and those who are ill to restrain and overcome it. And let us recommit ourselves to continue the work and struggle still before us to triumph over this scourge.

This year's theme is "I am my sister's and brother's keeper". It is an ethical assertion which commits us, as the Hebrew word for "to keep", *shamar*, suggests, to guard, protect and preserve each other. An ancient Egyptian word for this ethical obligation is *saw* (*sa-u*) with a similar range of meanings including—guard, protect, preserve, attend to and watch over. Within the meaning of the concept of being our sisters' and brothers' keeper, then, is being responsible for them and, of necessity, responsive to them. For only by being *responsive* to them can we be *responsible* for and to them.

Moreover, to say we are our sisters' and brothers' keepers is to say we see them as relatives, indeed primary relatives and this implies we are and must act as one large inclusive family. And this family we also call community whether we speak of it in local, national or international terms, i.e., in pan-African terms. Thus, our approach to the HIV/AIDS crisis must be to engage it as a *family affair*, a problem, challenge and way forward for our family. And if it is to be real and relevant, ethical and effective, then we must see and assert ourselves as sources of

service, support and sanctuary in this vital and ultimately victorious struggle.

We must begin, as always, in service, giving ourselves in work and good done for those who need and deserve it. For at the heart of all our morality is the respectful treatment of every human being as a bearer of dignity and divinity, and compassion and care for the vulnerable, i.e., the most easily injured, the poor, powerless and the ill, the stranger, prisoner, and the different. And if this is our duty to any other humans, what more do we owe our brothers and sisters? Let us do then the essential things: visit and assist them, talk with and counsel them for the good and against avoidable self-injury and always *to get the test, tell the truth and take the medicine*. It is carrying out our obligations as fellow brothers and sisters, giving a portion of ourselves to the practice and process of meeting the needs of our community and its members to heal and repair themselves, to prevent and reduce harm to themselves, and to live lives of good and promise.

To be sources of support means joining in the social and political struggle to secure justice for our brothers and sisters, to reduce and end disparities and the inequities that cause and sustain them. It requires building support structures for education, mobilization, organization, confrontation and transformation. Indeed, it means teaching our people the knowledge necessary to protect and preserve themselves, avoid harm to others, secure access to tests, medicines, treatment, care and all services available. It calls for mobilizing and organizing our people into a self-conscious social force for turning this thing around; saving and sustaining our lives; acquiring and using the resources available and needed; building adequately funded culturally competent programs and projects; and confronting the system and ourselves in ways that

**HIV/AIDS, A FAMILY AFFAIR:
BEING SOURCES OF SERVICE, SUPPORT AND SANCTUARY**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 02-12-15, p.A-6

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

yield the results we want, work for and deserve. And it means creating together the capacities and conditions for self and social transformation, leading to dignity-affirming, life-preserving and life-enhancing thinking and practices which move us beyond the tragedy expressed in being 12% of the population; 44% of new AIDS infections; 43% of those living with AIDS; and 48% of those dying from AIDS.

To be a source of sanctuary for our sisters and brothers is to provide for them safe, secure, caring, peaceful and reaffirming spaces free from stigma, harassment, violence, apprehension and fear. It means not only establishing physical space to provide these conditions, but also contextual space wherever we are by confronting, denouncing and ending stigma, discrimination, isolation and acts and words of hate, harassment and degradation. This means also moving our family, community and people beyond narrow and negative notions of human differences, of manhood and womanhood, of sex, sexuality, humanity itself and worthiness of respect, love, care and loving kindness.

Indeed, we are again, in a real sense, standing outside the gates of the city of Memphis (*Men-nefer*) in ancient Egypt with Pharaoh Piankhi, confronting a life-and-death situation. Like Piankhi, we must assume and move forward on the fundamental assumption and faith that we, like our Egyptian ancestors, have within ourselves the sources of our own salvation, the internal capacity and will of men and women to *choose life* over death and bring about a new day and way forward for them-

selves and our family. Thus, outside the walls of Memphis, Piankhi sent a message to the people of the city relevant for our times, saying "Behold two ways are before you (i.e., life and death), you may choose as you wish. *Open up* and you will *live*; *close down* and you will *die*". And he urges them to choose life over death saying, "Do not bar the gates of your life. Do not desire death and reject life". On the contrary, the people again are urged to choose life, open up to new ways of thinking, feeling, speaking and acting and build together the good life, city and society they all deserved.

So, as we say in Kawaida, there are signs here for those who want to see, lessons for those who want to learn and a path forward for those who want to pursue it. In this teaching, our ancestors clearly call on us to choose life, reject death and do what is necessary to protect and preserve our lives and build a good life for ourselves and future generations. And this means taking primary responsibility for the lives we live, waging struggle internally and externally for the good, and seeing ourselves as ill and injured physicians who must heal and rebuild ourselves in the process and practice of repairing and remaking the world. And to do this, we must open our hearts and minds to feelings, thoughts and practices that rightfully anchor, enlighten and elevate us, and make us gladly willing to become a constant and unwavering source of service, support and sanctuary for each other in illness, sorrow and suffering, and in the ongoing struggle to achieve a good life of health, happiness, well-being and wholeness.

Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of Kwanzaa; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* and *Introduction to Black Studies*, 4th Edition, www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org; www.MaulanaKarenga.org.