

A Compassionate Approach To Activism

By Dee Farmer

Activism on the behalf of the Black Gay community is based on an important pillar; Lesbian and Gay men of color, who have endured repression from our conservative government and unschooled communities, and are fighting for freedom and full equality. We are people who can emphasize with one another as a result of our own peculiar experiences with anti-gay and racial prejudice. The pillars of our activism are primarily the same as other oppressed communities, inclusive of the universal obligation or morality that says that all persons should be treated fair and equal regardless of their race, sexuality, etc. Though our invocation of the same universal obligations as other people of color communities seemingly fuses the sundry communities fighting for equality, it becomes a truism that unification remains elusive due to preconceived prejudice. Indeed, the discrimination between people of color communities never promotes their respective identities, but ratifies the lack of compassion for our neighbor. The tenets of "compassionate activism" are further buffeted by the existence of prejudice in our own community. Yes, in our community!

Unfortunately, like other communities that struggle for equality, we too are guilty of abandoning our own—those who we may feel are not worthy of the cause or who are below our standards—prisoners who are lesbian and gay men of color.

If compassionate activism is to be worthy of the name, whether for prisoners or unincarcerated people, it is important that we distinguish ourselves: Does the ideology of those like Justice Thomas, who advocates that people of color do not need affirmative action, but "hard-work," have a place in our community? Or, does President Bush's exhortations and bills to "get tough on crime" negate our empathy and closeness for gay prisoners of color and the prejudice and bigotry that at least

partly contributed to the underpinings of their imprisonment? Given our reliance on the universal obligation of "equality", the answer to both of these questions should be no. We must be careful not to unconsciously appease those who perpetuate gay-hate by instigating prejudice in our own community. If we can all agree that "equality" means equal justice for everybody, then why is it that the national report on anti-gay violence reports only a modicum of anti-gay violence in prison? Case law and studies show that gay prisoners are frequently subject to anti-gay attacks, including sexual assaults and regular anti-gay epithets! Further, why is it that lesbian and gay men prisoners are without any national organization dedicated to advocating their particular needs and rights? This ostracism of gay prisoners from the community is mostly a result of our unwillingness to take a compassionate approach to activism.

It is inescapable that the Black community has been in a seemingly everlasting state of denial regarding Black lesbians and gay men. The poverty and lack of educational opportunities within many Black neighborhoods deprive Black people of the schooling that can promote the understanding and acceptance of different sexualities and ethnic groups. However, it should be noted that the Black community's strong commitment to family plays a significant role in the acceptance of lesbians and gay men within their respective families. Of course, this does not eradicate often scathing attacks upon Lesbians and Gay men during school, work and even at home. Notwithstanding, the poverty of their home and surroundings and the prejudice imposed by society at large, it is these inequities that exacerbate crime within the Black gay and lesbian community. Moreover, the anti-gay attacks upon Black youngsters, who overtly display a predisposition to homosexuality by their peers can contribute to identity

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COMPASSIONATE APPROACH..

crises, anti-social behavior and eventually criminal behavior. Although many of us, as Black lesbians or gay men, have suffered this same type of debasement in our lives; the unmatched mental and physical brutality, segregation, dehumanization and antagonism that gay prisoners of color face in prison should move all of us to compassionate activism.

Unfortunately, the same anti-gay violence, victimization and defamiation that Black lesbians and gay men find so prevalent in society also exist in prison. However, it is much more concentrated. For example, a white lesbian or gay man who is sexually assaulted in prison receives sympathy and protection from prison officials and the judiciary. But, a Black gay prisoner does not receive this same treatment, mostly because prisons are about racism. According to the Human Rights Watch report on *Prison Conditions in the United States*, Blacks are incarcerated at a rate three times higher than Palestinians in the Israeli occupied West Bank and five times higher than Black people in South Africa. The uncontradictive fact that over sixty-percent of the prison population is poor and of color only confirms for the attentive observer that the U.S. criminal justice system is racist! And, as in society, racist attitudes are only intensified when coupled with homophobia. Therefore, in prison terminology, Black gay prisoners "don't have anything coming."

Let me paint a more vivid picture: Black gay prisoners are raped, stabbed and murdered in prison solely because of their sexuality. They are subject to the whim of their fellow prisoners while being excluded from all other forms of prison life. Many are denied parole simply because of their sexuality. Also, since homosexual intercourse is prohibited in prison, gay prisoners are

certainly singled-out for discriminatory treatment and excessive punitive segregation.

Moreover, the AIDS epidemic has hurdled unprecedented discrimination against gay prisoners into the prison environment. Most prisoners and their keepers being uneducated about AIDS transmission, continue to perpetuate the delusion that AIDS is primarily a gay disease; thus, promoting violence against gay prisoners. Of course, this is only secondary to the inadequate and often fatal health care that they receive. In AIDS units around the country, where HIV and AIDS infected prisoners are segregated, gay prisoners are crying out in agony and reaching out of the steel bars and gates that confine them for help. Regrettably, the majority of the voices and hands calling out to us are those belonging to lesbians and gay men of color. "Shall we reach through the prison fences, over the brick walls and into the cell bars with compassionate activism?"

Dee Farmer, a person incarcerated at the Springfield Federal Facility, is a trained paralegal and Executive Director of Dee Farmer & Associates, a prisoners' rights organization dedicated to advocating the rights of gay and AIDS-infected prisoners. □

Ms. Farmer's address: P.O. Box 4000, Springfield, MO 65808. Write!

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LIFE AFTER LIFE...

while by hanging with his friend Kyle, the only openly gay character in the entire novel, and Janelle, a woman who is unfortunately described as being a "fag hag." In a winter holiday (no mention of Kwanzaa here!) scene set in a scarcely-disguised Keller's Bar of New York, Raymond encounters the man of his dreams, Quinn. Quinn is married and the father of two children. According to him, his wife would not believe that he slept with him, "even if Jesus Christ himself told her" (p. 119). In the midst of this torrid affair with Quinn,

Candance (Kelvin's present fiancée) introduces Raymond to Nicole. In the meantime, it is revealed that Kyle is not only a commercial sex worker ("a call boy", p. 180), but also "hooked on crack and alcohol" (p. 180). Raymond decides to break off his relationship with Quinn, partially because he wants to pursue the relationship with Nicole and the possibility of "changing" (?), partially because he sees no future to his life with Quinn. Raymond and Nicole have very unsafe sex. All of a sudden, Candance is sick and in the hospital. As Nicole questions Raymond about Kelvin's past life, Raymond blurts out that he (Raymond) is "gay...well, I guess you could say I'm bisexual" (p. 209). Nicole tells Raymond that Candance has AIDS. Raymond then proceeds to go home and attempts suicide by downing Somnifex and vodka. Quinn comes to the rescue, but Raymond will not let him stay the night: "When I heard the door close I wanted to call Quinn back, but deep down I knew only Nicole could ease my pain." (p. 214) Raymond's father appears and they have a heated conversation which seems to lead to a rather muddled understanding between the two. Raymond writes an awkward coming-out letter to Nicole, in which he laments and apologizes for his "bisexuality." Candance and Kelvin are married in the hospital. The day after the wedding, she dies. Janelle tells Raymond that she is pregnant. She also seems, in the author's eyes, to have not been preoccupied with safer sex. Raymond returns to Birmingham in time for Sela's marriage to a dentist. With his mother's promise of unending love on his 29th birthday, Raymond receives a surprise phone call from Nicole and this novel mercifully comes to a close. If this sounds to you more like ONE LIFE TO LIVE or GAYS OF FOUR LIVES than Audre Lorde's ZAMI, then I would have to agree with you.

In an era of repression, it is always encouraging when voices that have been silenced begin to speak and make themselves heard. It is even more exciting for us as people of

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