



**BLACK HEALTH, WELLNESS AND STRUGGLE:  
TOWARDS A RADICAL RACIAL HEALING**

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**T**HIS YEAR'S BLACK HISTORY MONTH theme, "Black Health and Wellness" opens space for us to call into focus our self-determined and self-sustaining ways of knowing, working and struggling to achieve, protect, promote and sustain our health, health care and healing in a society which is the source of so much of our preventable sickness, needless suffering, and underserved deaths. And thus arises the undeniable need for righteous and relentless struggle, not only to achieve justice and end oppression, but also to achieve a comprehensive radical racial healing.

Indeed, to speak of Black health and wellness is, of necessity, to speak of Black ill-health and unwellness and society's role in our compromised immune system, the inadequacy and absence of health care for us, our intergenerational and transgenerational racial trauma, the tragedies of system-cultivated and supported self-hatred, self-injury and suicide, and the long list of diseases we suffer in greater numbers and with the severest outcomes. And it is to speak also of the pathological and pathogenic character of society which is not only sick itself, but produces sickness and sick people, victimizers and victims, with various kinds of problems of health and wellness. And again, there is the obvious and ongoing needs and obligation to resist and radically transform this system of imposed social and human sickness.

Here we want to understand health and wellness in the most comprehensive and expansive ways. As the World Health Organization states in its definition, "Health is the state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Thus, *we define health,*

*wellness and well-being as the absence of disease, injury and impairment and the presence of physical, emotional, mental and socio-economic conditions and capacities to live a good and meaningful life; fulfill our relational obligations and rightful expectations of our loved ones and respected others; develop our potential; and come into the fullness of ourselves.* Given this meaning and essentiality of good health and the wholeness it promises and produces, access to quality healthcare is an essential human right. For it not only is a matter of wellness, but also a matter of life and death. And thus, it must be achieved and sustained in righteous and relentless struggle.

There is an overwhelming abundance of compelling evidence that racism, systemic and relational, has a tremendous negative impact on the physical and psychological health and well-being of Black people. Likewise, there is overwhelming and convincing evidence that socio-economic status and capacity is a vital determinant of health and wellness, ill-health and unwellness, vulnerabilities to disease and possibilities of recovery and survival. And in a society that reasons, values, allocates and algorithmizes by race, class, power and profit considerations, Black people and other people of color, poor people and the disempowered and devalued are constantly victims of preventable illness, needless suffering, and underserved deaths.

The system of racism has caused a series of mental health problems for African Americans, causing us in various numbers and varied degrees to doubt ourselves, deny ourselves, condemn ourselves and then mutilate ourselves both psychologically and physically. This means that to radically heal ourselves, we must reject these practices and

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dare to be ourselves and free ourselves in radical and rightful ways. And it begins by reaffirming and maintaining our dignity and humanity “at all costs” as Nana Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune taught. And with Nana Haji Malcolm, “we must recapture our heritage and identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy” and build the good life we all want and deserve.

So, yes, we must be concerned about our physical health, but we cannot be negligent about our mental health, emotional health and our spiritual health. And we must also be concerned with our socio-economic health, how and where we live, reparative justice and our adequate income and material well-being, the social and physical environment and its levels of pollution, poisons, food deserts, dilapidation, and internal and externally imposed violence.

It is as Nana Frantz Fanon has said in the process and practice of radically transformative struggle that we will radically heal ourselves. In that tradition, Kawaida poses us as, not only freedom fighters and advocates and activists for racial and social justice, but also injured physicians who can and will heal, repair, renew and remake ourselves in the process and practice of repairing and remaking the society that oppresses us, and generates and yet justifies our illnesses and injuries as our own doing. But our oppressor must not be our teacher and we must avoid the self-savaging of generalized self-indictment, confusing it with legitimate and necessary ongoing self-examination, critique and correction.

Now as we’ve said, the oppressor is responsible for our oppression, but we are responsible for our liberation. And part of our emancipatory responsibility and liberational obligation is to hold our oppressor accountable. This means confronting the system that oppresses us and struggling to transform it

and make the health system and its structures, policies, and practices serve the interests of the people, not the interests of big pharma, corporate greed and politicians’ craven collaboration with them.

Thus, in the tradition of Nana Fanon, we see Black people’s resistance to oppression as central to their radical racial healing, but also central to transforming medical practice itself. Medical practitioners must not simply do standard, system-oriented medicine, but must support the people in their resistance and insist on medically serving our community in the most culturally competent and effective ways. And they must engage also the racist social system itself and the conditions that foster ill-health, unwellness, deaths and early dying among Black people.

The struggle for radical racial healing, like the overarching struggle to be ourselves and free ourselves from domination, deprivation and degradation, is a long, difficult, dangerous and demanding one, but it must be waged. It is an intergenerational and transgenerational struggle and a shared work and struggle of everyone. It must be systemic and systematic, confronting the whole system. We must dare to expose, dismantle and dissolve all structures, policies and practices which are dignity-denying, life-diminishing and unworthy of the name medicine as a healing art in the tradition of our honored ancestors Imhotep and Peseshet, the first physicians.

To say that the struggle is the shared responsibility of all is to reaffirm that it is both a personal and collective liberational project and practice. It is personal because each person must, in the context of family and community and the larger struggle, begin and continue the earnest striving and struggle to heal themselves. They must practice new ways of life, place health as one of their highest values and focus on living

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healthy lives and struggling to create the relational and social conditions to achieve this. Indeed, as Nana Frantz Fanon says, “an authentic national liberation exists only to the precise degree to which each person has irreversibly begun their own liberation” in the context and service of the national liberation struggle. For there is no separate liberation for anyone and those who attempt it, end up settling for the undignified compromise of seeking a comfortable place in oppression.

THE RECENT CONCERN ABOUT “RACIAL battle fatigue” among our people suggests and points to the fact that as we’ve said since the Sixties, Black people might not be *at war*, but they are *in a war*,

constantly waged against us. Indeed, as Nana Paul Robeson said, “the battlefield is everywhere there is no sheltered rear.” In a word, there is no sanctuary or safe place beyond the total war zone of racism’s aggressions, micro or macro, physical or psychological. Indeed, this is why Nana Haji Malcolm X stated that “wherever a Black (person) is there is a battleline. Whether it’s in the North, South, East or West, you and I are living in a country that is a battleline for all of us.” And thus, we say, in this struggle for radical racial healing and the larger overarching struggle to be ourselves and free ourselves, “everywhere a battleline, every day a call to struggle.”▲

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