



GIFT-GIVING AND SHARING GOOD DURING KWANZAA: LESSONS FOR LIFE AS WELL AS CELEBRATION

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ABOVE ALL, GIFT-GIVING IS THE SHARING OF good, and practiced rightly, it becomes not only a ritual of celebration, but also a lesson and a model and mirror of how we should live our lives. For it is not only the giving of things, but also a sharing of the good of ourselves, expressing beautiful emotions and building, reaffirming and reenforcing our relationships in reciprocal sharing. We teach in *Kawaida* that at the heart of all righteous, real and meaningful giving is the giving of ourselves in whole or in part, depending on the kind, strength and meaning of our relationships. But in any case, we give very little if we do not give to those worthy a significant part of ourselves regardless of whatever else we give.

As the season of gift-giving opens up during our end-of-the-year holidays, we know our gift-giving should be and needs to be more than a simple offering and exchange of money and material things. But we know that in a materialist and consumerist society, gift-giving can and often does lose its best meaning and becomes a mechanical and mindless response to massive and endless advertising, and problematic aspirations to demonstrate or outdo, or to fit in or make false or flimsy claims of love, care or concern. Thus, it is important for us who actually care to hold fast to this deeply African and human practice of gift-giving in its most meaningful forms. This means engaging it as a vital way of sharing good, expressing caring, bringing joy, giving thanks, offering assistance, building and strengthening relationships, and practicing reciprocity of good done and good returned.

As December begins and we move towards the celebration of *Kwanzaa*, I am reminded of the early discussions we had in the organization Us about gift-giving that shaped my creation of *Kwanzaa* and my development of the protocol and practice of gift-giving. The intention here was to avoid the negatives of gift-giving imposed by a consumerist society and to reaffirm the positives of gift-giving which had as its center the giving of a meaningful part of ourselves, especially for our children, and the self-conscious practicing of the best of our culture. In

this regard, I want to share with you a section from my book on Kwanzaa titled *Kwanzaa, A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* (Sankore Press) on “*Zawadi*, Gift-Giving”, as an essential but not dominating or diverting practice which dilutes and diminishes the integrity, expansive meaning and beauty of the holiday as a whole.

One of the seven symbols of the holiday Kwanzaa is the *zawadi* or gifts which like the other symbols carry within them a particular cultural message and meaning vital to the practice of the holiday. “The *zawadi* are symbolic of the seeds sown by the children (i.e., commitments made and kept) and of the fruits of the labor of the parents. Traditionally, gifts were given of what was made or grown. Thus, it was an act of sharing and labor of love and tended to avoid the alienated gift-giving which involves purchasing to impress rather than to please and share. During the first Kwanzaa in 1966, advocates of Us argued the pros and cons of gift-giving around the questions of whether it would duplicate the negatives of Christmas gift-giving. Out of those discussions came the following principles and practices which we developed as preventives which often accompany Christmas gift-giving.

First, we decided that even though we respected the desire of our children to have gifts at that time because of peer concerns and the relentless push of seasonal advertising, Kwanzaa gift-giving would not be automatic or done without reference to the needs of the people and their struggle. Kwanzaa gift-giving by the internal demands of the holiday had to be designed to be instructive and inspirational. Kwanzaa gift-giving was, therefore, established first to encourage further in our children the making and keeping of commitments of personal growth and achievement which benefit the collective. Our intention was to establish and reinforce the concept that practical and emotional commitments to a principled and productive life is rewarded, not only in terms of receiving gifts, but also in terms of internal growth and satisfaction as well as benefit to the community. Thus, such a

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practice, we felt could, if handled correctly, serve as positive reinforcement for the values of social achievement and progressive perfection which would benefit not only the child and immediate family, but also our people.

Secondly, we decided that Kwanzaa gift-giving had to be open and informed so that parents would receive due credit for their sacrifice and hard work to provide their children with the gifts. This, in fact, also put an end to the negative and demeaning practice of reducing African American parents to the role of mediators and messengers for a European cultural symbol in red and white, promising things that he could not deliver and had no idea of whether the parents could either. Such an arrangement not only makes a mockery of reality, but also damages the image of loving and productive parents in the process.

Thirdly, it was agreed that in order to escape the economic entrapment of Christmas advertising, we would not buy presents until after Christmas and also observe some basic guidelines. These include the stipulations that: 1) children be the main recipient of Kwanzaa gifts; 2) that the gifts be given on the basis of commitments made and kept; and 3) that they not be mandatory or excessive. To purchase gifts after Christmas is to take advantage of after-Christmas sales and thus escape the exorbitant prices established for the season. Secondly, making children the main recipients of gifts rightly lowers the number of recipients and in many cases also lowers the price of the gifts. Thirdly, to make the gift equal in value to the achievement record moderates the mania for unrestricted buying just for the season or in response to the open or subliminal seduction of advertisers. And fourthly, the stipulation that the gifts not be mandatory or excessive relieves poor parents of feeling that they have to compete with the Jones and Jenkins or even the Omowales, regardless of the economic burdens this imposes on them.

The final condition agreed upon to save Kwanzaa gift-giving from the negatives of Christmas gift-giving was the stipulation that it never be alienated either in terms of the practice or the purpose. This essentially means two things. First, it means that gifts will never be given as a substitute for parental love, attention and involvement with the child on every level of her/his life. Kwanzaa seeks to establish and reinforce warm, meaningful and authentic exchanges between parents and children and to counter the alienated and alienating practices of giving expensive gifts in substitute for ourselves. Thus, Kwanzaa gift-giving revolves around and respects the fact that the gift is but an extension of ourselves and includes a vital part of us, i.e., our love and concern which the gift should express or it is meaningless - or worse, a mockery.

SECONDLY, IN ORDER TO AVOID LACK OR poverty of purpose in our gift-giving, we agreed that Kwanzaa gifts must always include two items: a) a book, and b) a heritage symbol - regardless of what else is given. This stipulation clearly points to our priorities of building and liberating our people. The book reflects and reinforces our commitment to education as an indispensable part of the struggle for liberation and reconstruction. It fits firmly in the framework of the Kawaida contention that the key struggle is to recover and reconstruct our culture and history and begin to reshape reality in our own image and according to our own needs. The heritage symbol can be an African art object; a *talasimu* (the Us organization symbol); a picture of Nanas Fannie Lou Hamer, Malcolm X, Mary M. Bethune, Martin L. King, W.E.B. DuBois, Anna J. Cooper; or any other hero, heroine or any appropriate representation of our history and culture. Its purpose is to keep us constantly in touch with ourselves, our history and our own humanity. In a word, it is to shield us from the vulgar envelopment by the views and values of the dominant society, remind us of the richness of our past and point to the unlimited possibilities of our future.”▲

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