



Voices of Community: Where Love and Power Meet

In a dishonorable world, are the honorable at a disadvantage? The surface answer seems to be yes, writes AIDS United's Joseph D. Stango, but the truer answer is more unsettling.

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This blog post is by Joseph D. Stango, a senior project manager at AIDS United.

In a dishonorable world, are the honorable at a disadvantage? I was at a leadership retreat a few years ago when I was first asked this question, and ever since, it has been ringing in my ears.

The surface answer seems to be yes, but I believe the truer answer is more unsettling. Honorable people are not necessarily disadvantaged when it comes to worldly success. They can lead institutions, win campaigns, build coalitions, and move resources. But they are often in danger. Further, paradoxically, they are in danger precisely because of the danger they represent.

They are dangerous because their lives testify that another way is possible. Especially when they are public-spirited, honorable people threaten systems that depend on cynicism, resignation, and moral amnesia. Their example exposes the lie that injustice is inevitable, that compromise with cruelty is "just how things work." That exposure rarely goes unpunished.

In 1968, months before his assassination, a Harris Poll found that roughly 75 percent of Americans disapproved of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. To some, he was too slow and his commitment to nonviolence outdated. To others, he was too radical — particularly when he bound racial justice to economic justice and named, before it was fashionable, the moral catastrophe of the Vietnam War. Public memory has since been carefully laundered. Time, selective quotation, and political agendas have softened King into something safer: a dream without demands.

I suspect that if people today were fully reminded of his ideas beyond that dream, his current approval ratings would plummet (though I pray they would not fall as low as they once did). King insisted on the "inescapable network of mutuality" that binds us together, warning that injustice anywhere threatens justice everywhere. He argued, unapologetically, that movements must organize economic and political power. Power, he said, is not evil in itself; it is the ability to achieve purpose. He taught us that love without power is sentimental and anemic, and that power without love is reckless and abusive. The crisis of his and our time is their separation.

Justice, understood as a practice rather than a slogan, demands hard internal and community

work: self-understanding, self-respect, and self-command. These are not easily acquired, but without them, moral language collapses into performance.

Responsibility is a funny word. We use it to mean any number of things: duties, obligations, task load, team roles, legal requirements, etc. Yet break it down to its basic parts, and another, more essential meaning emerges. Response-Ability: if you hear a call for help and have the ability to respond, then you must.

This is the ethical ground on which the Sector Transformation initiative stands; it has also been the bedrock of our collective work since the dawn of the HIV epidemic. Transforming systems — whether in public health, social services, or community infrastructure — requires power shaped by love, responsibility rooted in deep listening, and institutions willing to practice justice rather than merely praise it. In a dishonorable world, that work is risky. But it is also how another way becomes real.

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