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## 1990 Letter to Black church leaders about annual Day of Remembrance for Black Gay Men and Lesbians

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Feb 16, 1990

Dear Reverend,

Sunday, February 25th is our second annual Day of Remembrance for Black Gay men and Lesbians. Instituted last year by the National Coalition for Black Lesbians and Gays (NCBLG), an 11-year-old grassroots organization which advocates for the rights of Black Gay men and Lesbians, the day will be celebrated by our chapters in various cities around the country, including our local Boston chapter, BCBLG.

NCBLG has chosen Black History Month as the appropriate time to honor our Black Gay and Lesbian dead, considering we have always been a part of the Black community, working and struggling and dying for our freedom as Black people. We are all aware that no people can respect themselves without claiming their own history. Before Black historian Carter G. Woodson created and championed the idea of setting aside a specific time to focus on it, our Black history was seen as a joke to a vast majority of citizens in this country. Women's history was in the same category until the feminist efforts of the last two decades.

Now women's history claims the month of March. Likewise, Gay and Lesbian history is currently being resurrected and recorded. We as Black Gay men and Lesbians are as proud of our Gayness as we are of our Blackness. Therefore, we have chosen this time of self respect to reach out to our heterosexual Black brothers and sisters, and trust that some among you will reach out to us in turn.

As you are no doubt aware, 10% of the population in the world, including all ethnic groups, is Gay or Lesbian. Jesse Jackson spoke to over 600,000 participants at the October 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights. Approximately 7% of the crowd, about 40,000, were Black; this was the largest number of Blacks ever seen at a Gay or Lesbian event. Yet, the majority of Black Lesbians and Gay men live their lives in the closet. In fact, tens of thousands of the Black participants whose hearts swelled with pride and solidarity at that 1987 march returned home to continue living in secrecy, fear and isolation, hiding their identity from friends, family and coworkers.

The most tragic consequence of this secret life is that many Gay men who lived in the closet have died in the past few years, still lonely and isolated among friends and family who felt it necessary to keep mum about the fact that they had died of AIDS. We need to constantly remember that throughout the world, especially Africa and the U.S.,

AIDS kills Black people at a considerably higher rate than it does whites. As a people, we have always kept faith with our ancestors by honoring the dead out of respect for the living. We intend to continue that tradition, whatever the cause of death. AIDS, although the most virulent enemy of our community, is not the only killer. Cancer stalks Lesbians, just as it does heterosexual women in any community; and Black women, regardless of sexual orientation, die disproportionately from cancer in comparison to white women. Last year cancer claimed Pat Parker, one of our community's most well-known Black Lesbian activist poets, at age 45. In addition to cancer and AIDS, our Lesbian and Gay community is decimated by alcoholism, suicide, and high levels of stress, much of it brought on by a society too judgmental and homophobic to look beyond its own prejudices and allow others to live their lives according to

their own conscience. One might expect oppressed groups who are targeted for attack because of their race or gender to be more understanding of the plight of those of us who are attacked because of our sexual orientation. Unfortunately, Blacks who are painfully aware of the danger in allowing an atmosphere of racial intolerance to build up, who speak out immediately when they hear a group of white supremacists spewing hatred toward Blacks, or who will not allow sexist behavior toward women, often unwittingly or complicitly allow an atmosphere of ranting and railing against homosexuals, which leads to hate crimes of harassment, assault, battery, mayhem and even murder. This tacit agreement by silent consent can and does lead to the death of Black Lesbians and Gay men at the hands of (generally) young men who have been allowed to think that if there's one group they can revile and physically attack with impunity, it's Gay men and Lesbians.

As painful as this attack is, however, it is not as painful as the turning away of friends and family. And this turning away is devastating, even in some cases life threatening. A recent study by the federal government shows that the suicide rate for Lesbian and Gay adolescents is higher than for any other group. Additionally, oppression of a targeted group causes depression within the group; and this depression shuts down the energy and creativity an oppressed people need in order to overcome obstacles. Black people are already so devastated by racism that we need all the support we can give to one another. When racism happens within the white Lesbian and Gay community, where does a Black Lesbian or Gay man go? To the Black community? But when Lesbian/Gay bashing, verbal and physical, is perpetrated by our own Black brothers and sisters and there is no Black voice raised against it, where then does a Black Lesbian or Gay man go? By withdrawing its approval and love, by shutting Lesbians and Gay men into a closet, the Black community loses many voices which could be raised, and much positive energy and creativity which needs to be utilized for the good of us all.

Even those Lesbians and Gay men who have status, education, money, talent and fame remain hidden deep in their closets because they fear the withdrawal of family and community support. Several prominent and well-respected Black people have lived and died too afraid of the scorn of public opinion and the withdrawal of family and/or friends to be able to come out with their true Gay or Lesbian identity even though "everyone knew" the truth. The legendary organizer Bayard Rustin was an early labor organizer and a disciple of A. Phillip Randolph. He was also a staunch Pan Africanist. A genius in creating strategies during the civil rights battles of the fifties and sixties, he was the chief architect of Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 March on Washington. Rustin was one of the few Black men who dared to live and speak as an openly Gay man - a radical act for his time in history. Author James Baldwin was another. Poet, philosopher, and educator Audre Lorde has lived an openly Lesbian life for over 25 years, speaking out for justice for all, including the indigenous peoples on several continents. Simon Nkoli, a Black South African anti-apartheid activist declared himself Gay in the middle of a treason trial four years ago and became an instant international hero within the movement. When Nkoli speaks, he eloquently links anti-apartheid and Gay/Lesbian struggles. He draws connections between all oppressions and liberation struggles, stating that we must be part of an inclusive politics and beingness which calls on the best within us.

This is NCBLG's message as well. Granted, it's going to be difficult for some of us to do so, but if we are to advance, it is crucial that we make the connection between all struggles for justice. It is important to realize that by giving me my rights you do not diminish, but actually enhance, your own. As we have learned from certain battles, for example the recent victory over Robert Bork's nomination to the Supreme Court, banding together in coalition for a common

cause works when the stakes are high. What we need to learn on a fundamental level is that an inclusive frame of mind, one that gives to others the same respect as a human being one expects for oneself, is not only a spiritual way to live, but a sensible one which allows us all to inhabit an earth where difference is respected. Only in this way can every person expect to go anywhere and be respected for who we are either as an individual who happens to be different, or as part of a group which is different from the majority.

This larger vision is beginning to develop. In early 1989, Reverend Carl Bean, the openly Gay Black pastor of Unity Fellowship Church of Los Angeles, was presented with the NAACP Image Award for his community work. And only last November, the first openly Gay Black politician, Keith St. John, was elected to the City Council in Albany, New York. But, famous or not, we all deserve to live without fear. And all of us who have had the courage to admit our identity to ourselves and embrace it need to be honored - even those who have had to take their secret to the grave.

Therefore, in 1989 NCBLG set aside the last Sunday in February, which falls on February 25th this year, to honor Black Gay men and Lesbians from any period in our recent or distant history. It is in that spirit that we ask your support, not as an endorsement of our life choices, but as a recognition that Black Gay men and Lesbians have always been part of the struggle for justice, even as our fellow travelers denied us that same justice because of our sexual orientation. We ask your support as fellow members of an oppressed ethnic group which recognizes that we are your brothers and sisters, fathers and mothers, daughters and sons, grandmothers and grandfathers; we are your friends, neighbors and co-workers. We live, work and worship among you, are oppressed for being Black, doubly oppressed for being Gay, and triply oppressed as women if we are Lesbians. We ask your support because we are standing up for ourselves and need to know that others stand with us in recognizing our right to live free of intimidation and fear. Your acknowledgement of our humanity and your support are critical to our survival.

We ask you to support us by taking up a special collection to help us continue doing our work within the Black Gay and Lesbian community and in the larger and far more hostile heterosexual community. We have all learned from our movement struggles that only by building liaisons with people of good will can we expect to bring about any change within our society. We have found this truth to be consistently self-evident, beginning with the Abolitionist Movement of the 19th century, through the Civil Rights Movement of the fifties and sixties, continuing through the Women's Movement and the Anti-war Movement of the seventies, and the Gay/Lesbian movement of the eighties. And with the steady beat throughout the century of the Pan Africanist movement.

Please consider conveying some of this information to your congregation and to others as well. By making people aware of the reasons for this day, you will help to foster the compassion and respect for others' choices that need to exist, particularly in a community made up of individuals who are inextricably bound together in a common oppression and beset by common enemies.

Thank you for reading this letter. If you find it impossible to speak on this matter, you might consider contacting a speaker to come to your church. If there is further information you would like, please write the address below.

Make checks payable to NCBLG and mail to:ANGELA BOWEN, NCBLG, P.O. BOX  
426, CAMBRIDGE, MA. 02139  
Toward Freedom,

Angela Bowen Co-Chair, National Coalition for Black Lesbians and Gays

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