

The School of Five-Weapons

Ko Imani, Shirt of Flame excerpt

Individually and as a queer community, the time has come to make a bold and decisive commitment to the most congruent and effective means to create change that we can muster given our current knowledge. We have two options, but we must choose wisely, for only one alternative nourishes life. Our enemies have already made their choice—the sword of Fear, falsity and dissolution. We must choose growth, wholeness, transcendence, truth, revelation, cultivation and Love!

However, we must remember that Love is not a hoe, not a hammer. Love is not a pen, saw, mask, nor ship to sail across our conflict in repose. Love is not even a weapon. Love may not be wielded and then yielded when the war is won. This love is the “thunderbolt within,” a

power which cannot be displaced nor lulled back to sleep once awakened. To choose the instrument of Love is to don “the intolerable shirt of flame.” to put on the garment, a second and shimmering skin, the very being, of Love. Each of us must become Love, in chosen, earthy, and real Incarnation, by choosing to respond to every situation with it.

To become an Incarnation is not to lose self. These processes and ethics do no harm to individuality or free will. This articulation of 21st Century queer activism does not require that we all think in exactly the same way, agree what our most important issues are, or undertake exactly the same projects to transform culture and society. We will not dissolve into a homogeneous movement but unite into an unbreakable web of snowflakes and sunlight, distinct and glorious.

At the same time, to weave that web we must determine the strongest connectors between us, including a Love-centered moral basis for action upon which we can all agree. We cannot continuously choose the weapon of Love if our activism is undertaken because we feel threatened, maligned and discriminated against.



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For most of human history, morality has been defined by large groups of people engaged in one or another religion. However, in the 21st Century we blink and breathe in an age of pluralism. Most people acknowledge that their personal freedom to choose their spiritual journey is threatened when other people are denied the pursuit of other religions, and yet there are so many different religions, with so many moralities, that our society lacks a comprehensive moral rudder. As in life, we can determine which way to go by where our obstacles lie. In this case, “there are too many opinions to be able to set a standard” points to the answer: we must find a morality outside of the divisions.

This diverse new millennium requires a morality as powerful as it is comprehensive, fresh and compassionate. We require an ethic not rooted in any church’s doctrine or tradition but that still allows for our incredible array of traditions and belief systems. This Universal Ethical Standard (UES) must also set reasonable limits on what is permissible in a modern and diverse society based on what seems to be the most basic right of living beings: the right of every individual to take action in the pursuit of their genuine happiness or to avoid suffering. So, the Universal Ethical Standard defines an acceptable (ethical) act as “any action taken in the pursuit of happiness or the avoidance of suffering which does not infringe upon the happiness of another.” Significantly, the UES is based on our sameness as living beings, not on our differences. Unlike old models, the UES involves a bringing together instead of a dividing.

With the UES, we claim the freedom imagined by our ancestors: a global society in which all people—regardless of religion, race, gender identity and expression, creed, sexual orientation, political affiliation, and every other separating label between people—are welcomed with equal opportunity for joy in living and peace in dying. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called this vision the “Beloved Community.” The King Center explains:

“Dr. King’s Beloved Community is a global vision, in which all people can share in the wealth of the earth. In the Beloved Community, poverty, hunger and homelessness will not be tolerated because international standards of human decency will not allow it. Racism and all forms of discrimination, bigotry and prejudice will be replaced by an all-inclusive spirit of sisterhood and brotherhood. In the Beloved Community, international disputes will be resolved by peaceful conflict-resolution and reconciliation of adversaries, instead of military power. Love and trust will triumph over fear and hatred. Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict.”

One may (and some probably will) argue that to impress an ethical template like the Universal Ethical Standard on our entire society might bring us to the edge of chaos, or turn the capital to salt, as society’s prejudicial, patriarchal, heterosexist traditions are gradually transformed by our compassionate fulfillment of a dream of freedom. The point



is, of course, that in this case there is a distinct choice: either we choose to engage and fulfill our vision of justice, respect and freedom, or we choose to put the lie to innumerable years of inspired and eloquent evolution. Not coincidentally, the choice our nation faces is also the choice for us as LGBT people: do we claim our lives and loves or relinquish the entire possibility of our true being? Do we do what we know is best for us or continue to wallow, struggle and self-destruct?

Although occasionally a government will jump ahead of its citizenry—ending racial segregation, for example—governments usually change as a result of popular transformation. If a critical mass of citizens changes their thinking, their representative government will necessarily reflect that change.

If there is one baseline assumption upon which *Shirt of Flame* is based, it's that the means are inherent in the end. Hate has never displaced hate, and violence cannot end violence. One cannot separate the result from the process of achieving it. Because the true freedom of a Beloved Community is the end we desire—a mass paradigm shift toward refined love and deep nonviolence is required to transform our government and make the nation culturally sustainable. Refined love and deep nonviolence, must dictate the process of change because the end we desire is loving, decent, affirming and fraternal. As citizens change one by one, nations change collectively. A 13-year study by Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson estimates that 50 million such “Cultural Creatives” are already active in the United States alone!

Once we really get it, that the means are inherent in the end, we begin to understand the potential violence inherent in the “us-versus-them” thinking upon which conflict is usually based, and we shift our thinking toward an “us-and-them” model. Like an arm or leg, queers cannot be actually separated from the body of society, however much we may be denied or despised; however great our bitterness toward the rest of the body. “An eye for an eye just leaves the whole world blind,” as the saying goes.

We LGBT people are both inseparably part of and at the same time held at a distance from society, but our very peripheral-ness may be our greatest asset! Those of us who have been marginalized by a patriarchal, ageist, racist and heterosexist society, who already feel separated from its culture of Fear, have an advantage because of our isolation. Just like peacocks making brilliant feathers by eating thorns, we can use the principles in *Shirt of Flame* to transform the darkness and the distance we are given.

The *Shirt of Flame* path to victory comes easier to those who already feel different and outside the affection of society because for us, the fundamental fear of being perceived as “different” has already been faced! We know, on a deep and personal level, that we have been marginalized because we are different in some ways: because of whom and how we love; because we look different or have not lived as long or have lived



longer; because our gender identification or behavior is perceived as deviant and/or unnatural; or simply because we fundamentally disagree with various socially-acceptable paradigms and policies.

Differences are, paradoxically, what human beings most value and most despise. Human beings virtually idolize those who, because of their deviation from social norms, inspire us to live our lives more fully—whether it’s Madonna or Mohandas K. Gandhi. At the same time, at certain levels of development, the prospect of being perceived as different can be very threatening. Every act of violence and war has the same origin: that someone or a group of “somebodies” is different and other, and must be possessed, dominated, altered or destroyed.

When we interact with oppressive society from our anger, fear or pain, we actually affirm to ourselves the social identification of us as “outside,” “different,” or “alienated.” Adopting a Shirt of Flame method means that we choose, instead, to affirm our constituent and responsible function as part of the body of society. After we have transformed the thorns society gives us into plumage, our outsider status can empower us. We then have the strength and agility to stand up in the boat to challenge group-think mentality, to boldly point in a new direction across the waters toward the island of a Beloved Community.

This is a challenging reversal of traditional “us-versus-them” activist thinking and an assertive affirmation of the society we wish to co-create. We become travelers of speed, at the outside edge of culture, great patriots of the ethical, inclusive and harmonious society to come instead of activists attempting to dominate society differently. Joseph Campbell insightfully said to Bill Moyers in *The Power of Myth* that “People have the notion of saving the world by shifting things around, changing the rules, and who’s on top, and so forth. No, no! Any world is a valid world if it’s alive. The thing to do is to bring life to it, and the only way to do that is to find in your own case where the life is and become alive yourself.”

Choosing the Shirt of Flame is a commitment to “finding where the life is and becoming fully alive yourself.” By exploring and defining yourself and your social contributions in new, wholly constructive ways, you will burn with your conscious and empowering difference from a society slumbering in fear.

Dr. King, for example, a black man in a predominantly white and certainly discriminating popular culture, led the African-American civil rights movement in the name of Love and nonviolence. He lived a life and inspired a movement grounded unconditionally in Love, although his life was hardly comfortable, filled with constant threats of scorn, death and failure. Because he woke himself and millions of others up



with the trumpet of justice, he became a target for all that was not Just. Love brings up everything unlike itself. Dr. King felt the fires of a Shirt of Flame.

Almost 40 years after his assassination, like Gandhi before him, King continues to be for us a pillar of fire sent into the darkness to light our way. We must carefully consider the past, in order to mindfully prepare for the future. Each of us must, in their own being, model the change she or he wishes to see in the world by including and transcending the lessons of history in struggle and in strategy.

At this point in the evolution of queer culture, we have the choice, as a People and as an LGBT community, to claim for ourselves freedom's promise of full, joyful and abundant life. No one else can do it for us, and no amount of parading and shouting will get us there. The only tool to end bigotry, to end hatred and violence, to end Fear—the only tool we can use to build the Beloved Community—is Love.

We must become the presence of that alternative.

The time has come for us to wake up from our narcoleptic lives.

It is time for us to choose.

Time to take up the weapon of Love.

Time to strip naked on the mountaintop and don the Shirt of Flame.

Ko Imani is a widely read writer, entrepreneur and agent of change. Ko's dozens of FIRE IN THE LAKE columns are already revolutionizing the way Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender people approach their personal relationships and their activism. Ko gives away his monthly FIRE IN THE LAKE columns to LGBT community centers, faith communities and PFLAG chapters for their newsletters and websites, through which Ko is touching the lives of almost ONE MILLION LGBT and Ally people. Ko and his husband, Michael, were married in Grand Rapids, Michigan, on June 25, 2000, and currently live near Ann Arbor, Michigan. <http://www.shirtofflame.com>



Creating Change In Our Lifetimes

A review by Sven Davisson

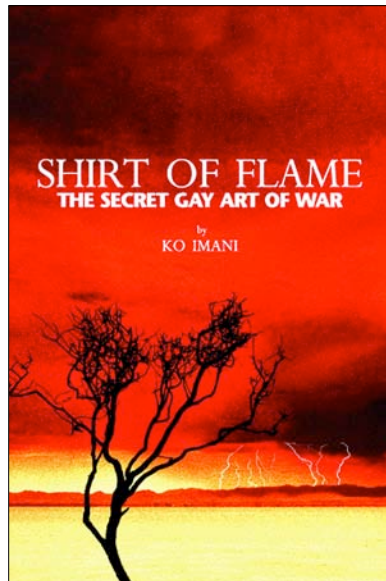
Shirt of Flame: The Secret Gay Art of War, Ko Imani
(Goko Media, 2003, 111pp, \$10.00)

In interviews granted near the end of his life, French philosopher Michel Foucault spoke of homosexuality as “an occasion to re-open effective and relational virtualities.” He spoke of an inherent potential to “introduce love where there’s supposed to be only law, rule or habit.” Foucault’s premises are core values I have carried with me for years. Now reading Ko Imani’s *Shirt of Flame: The Secret Gay Art of War*, I have found a manifesto that merges Foucault’s positivist vision of Queer placement and a Buddhist-derived concept of universal compassion, while throwing in a healthy dose of Sun Tzu.

Imani’s book is a rare find—a work that has the potential of turning the reader in a complete 180°. Imani writes with a passion and palpable immediacy: “We must create change now or not in our lifetimes.” Imani writes:

As LGBT individuals and as a queer community, the time has come to make a bold and decisive commitment to the most congruent and effective means to create change that we can muster given our current knowledge.

He opens the book with the mythic confrontation between a prince and an ogre. After using up all his weapons, the prince defeats the ogre by telling him he has thunderbolt in his belly that the ogre will not be able to digest. It is from this image that the book derives its name and emblematic symbol: the shirt of flame. The weapon of love that we carry with us.



Imani sees this “thunderbolt” as the only mechanism available to create truly instantaneous change. He theorizes that employing current weapons based solely on protest and confrontation will only prolong the fight for centuries to come.

The only means Imani sees for ‘true victory’ is “the cessation of hostility as well as the co-creation of new harmony and the transformation of the enemy into benevolent spirit.” During the course of the book, he systematically sets forth the goal, methodology and underlying theory. Imani uses Martin Luther King, Jr’s name the “Beloved Community” for his shining city upon a hill.

In the course of his book he undertakes a critical analysis of LGBT activism—its gains and shortcomings over the past 35 years. Imani asks where FIGHTING for LGBT rights has got the community and, the more uncomfortable question, what has it cost us. While acknowledging the hard-won gains, Imani also points out areas that to his eyes the activism has hurt the cause for overall acceptance into a peaceful community.

In addition to his insightful critique on activism, he embarks on an even more profound critique on the LGBT community (or communities). In my opinion, Imani correctly locates a failure in the community when it comes to support and nurturing or self-love and sanity. “Unable to understand or practice love in our own lives on a personal, micro-level,” Imani writes, “we are also unable to induce loving behavior and policies on a macro-level, societal scale.”

Imani’s book continues with a call for self-empowerment:

We do the oppressors' hardest work for them by allowing ourselves to be boxed in. We assume the worst and that keeps us from our best.

You, yes, YOU, deserve a full, joyful and abundant life filled with Truth, Beauty, Freedom and Love, but if you wait for someone else, somebody "over there," to give it to you on a platter—it ain't gonna happen. You have to claim it for yourself.

After his astute analysis, Imani sets out his vision of a positivist activism based on the fostering of love and harmony. He calls on each person to use their personal shirt of flame to create change—the universal through the immediate.

He makes an interesting point regarding civil disobedience. He identifies an impulse within the activist community that one has to martyr oneself through civil disobedience and arrest. He suggests that this is misguided and asks the thought-



provoking question: how can we be trusted to suggest laws, when we are breaking just laws ourselves in the name of justice?

Imani speaks from no one spiritual tradition, but his work draws deeply from a universal spiritual well. One can detect influences of Buddhism, Taoism and American Southern Baptist in his choice of phrase and terms he employs. Dalai Lama, Ghandi and King have prominent places in *Shirt of Flame*.

Imani writing style is erudite, clear and, at times, highly poetic. His vision is profound. Scratch the toaster, *Shirt of Flame* should be handed out with Queer membership cards.

