

How the AIDS Pandemic Changed My Life

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I HAVE OFTEN BEEN ASKED what pivotal moments have changed my life and what has deepened my heart. Many of us strive to have a deeper awareness and to be present for humanity. I believe there are no throw-away people. One of the most important things I have learned is that if we change just one small thing there is an opportunity to create a shift in the world. Let us remember that just a simple smile can soothe someone's heart and create change.

I have been working with life and death since the beginning of AIDS.

Many years ago, on a day cooler than usual for Los Angeles, the hospitals were filled to capacity. It was the early 1990s. We were on our way to a hospital in West Hollywood to see a young man who had heard about a group of people visiting people with AIDS. He didn't want to see me or any of my students for fear that we would be appalled at the condition of his body. As we entered his room in the AIDS ward, I thought my eyes were deceiving me; I had never seen such suffering. His body was covered with the worst case of Kaposi's sarcoma I had ever seen. Without hesitation, I jumped into the bed with him and held him tightly. He began to scream, and then he began to laugh. "Oh Ma," he

cried out, "I have not been out of my house for six months. I watched my body shrivel up as the AIDS virus has taken over."

Looking him in his eyes, I said, "Feel it, son; feel it in the depth of your heart and know that you are not this body." He died shortly after our visit, with greater hope in his heart. This experience changed my life forever.

I know in the depth of my heart that the Parliament of the World's Religions can make a difference. This is the forum where we can tell the stories and bring the awareness to everybody's heart that AIDS is not over. It is our responsibility to bring awareness to the issues that plague our globe, to create healing and the possibility of world peace.

I am reminded of my Travis. He was four years old and weighed twelve pounds. When I went to see him, his mouth was filled with sores; the doctors did not have anything to cure his condition. Knowing that this small child would love a sweet treat, I took a straw and began placing drops of soda in his mouth. His pain began to ease. He had not spoken for many days; he was a mere shadow of his former self. His eyes opened and he looked at me with the knowledge of eternity in his four-year-old withered body. He said two words: "Thank you." I thought my heart would break. Travis enjoyed his little sips of soda. He was never able to speak again, but he would nod and his little fingers would reach to touch my face. His courage changed my life forever. This young boy reminded a grown woman the meaning of two words: *thank you*. I remember wherever I go to share these two words, because gratitude can change our lives and change how we view and serve humanity.

I remember a little girl named Leslie who had multiple sclerosis as well as AIDS; she was one of thousands of young children who had been raped. She did not blame the world. She had so much courage and lived through so much heartache. I think back and remember how I held her as we spoke of death. I watched her smile with her first understanding of the knowledge that she was going to die. She finally understood why she couldn't play or ride a bicycle or run around like other children. I was able to share the Christ of her heart, and she was at peace in that moment. She brought me to my own true being.

So who will hear my story? I think back to a very special day in 1993, when I spoke at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago. I shared sacred poetry and the story of a young girl named Dena who suffered with AIDS. I can still remember the depth of silence in a room filled with thousands of people as I shared my experience of working with people with AIDS.

The Parliament has changed my life and has listened. I feel that we have learned to listen to each other and acknowledge our differences. As hunger, pain, violence, and disease spread throughout this world, I know we will have a voice—a voice that will be heard.

At the 1999 Parliament I walked through the streets of New Rest Township in Cape Town. A young man named Tondo stole my heart. His story was one of pain and suffering. He had lived through the wrath of ignorance and prejudice during the time of apartheid. He suffered so badly and was once left for dead, and yet he picked himself up and found work. He chose not to move out of the township but to help create a future for those who live there. He is raising a young son on his own. He brought us to his home and shared his life, his pain, and his people. We were invited to the town hall and were welcomed by the community leaders. We bought fruit, food, and school supplies for the community. We met the youth of New Rest. We went to the corner where a woman was selling fruit, and we bought her produce. Babies with bellies distended and hungry waited in line at their mother's hips, and we shared a moment offering our gifts of love.

Tondo walked us around the township, heat from the African sky beating down, and he proudly showed us the plans for a school building and future homes. This is a memory that will last me forever. One who speaks of another's life with passion can create change. That day in Cape Town was the beginning of a lasting relationship with the people of New Rest. We undertook the task to help to complete the Creche. Our plans include a marketplace to help people in the community earn a living selling their wares. The Parliament of the World's Religions offers opportunities to expand with the gift of giving to others.

I think of my children in Uganda, seven hundred orphans being

taken care of at Ma's Orphan Providence House. It is run by a beautiful Catholic priest, Father Centurio, who has suffered from religious violence and loss. Many children who have AIDS have lost both parents to AIDS and know they are dying—dying from indifference. I met Father Centurio through my interfaith work, at a conference where I begged people to listen that AIDS is not over yet. Here we found each other, and we continue to share our lives as we reach over an ocean of compassion.

I write this story overlooking a body of water on my ashram named after the holy river in India, the Ganga. This body of water holds the ashes of many hundreds and hundreds of our dead, many who have died because of the AIDS virus.

I am honored that people ask for their ashes to have a resting place in our sacred Ganga. Here they have a place to be in death as well as in life.

Since AIDS, my life has changed dramatically. I acknowledge in my own being that the force of God, Goddess, self, Buddha—the force of something deep within—must be used to create peace. I realize that every one of us has so much more to do.

My life changed in the face of AIDS. My life changed in the face of pain and hunger. I pray that we all become more generous—not just with money, but also with our time and our hearts. My religion is the religion of kindness, generosity, and gratitude. One does not have to believe a certain way to feel his or her heart and to feel the hearts of others. Being with the dying has taught me compassion and kindness. I see so much courage that there is no choice but to do more.

Four black folks raised me in the streets under the boardwalk in Coney Island; they were alcoholics, prostitutes, and drug addicts. It was here that I learned the great brightness of being loved that prepared me for the moment I live in now. I take my stories, the moments that have changed my life, and I hold them in my heart. I bring them to paper with two words: *thank you*.