

SISTER WHO'S PERSPECTIVE

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Overview

I think it is equally important to remember both the bad and good throughout one's life and to use the combination as constructively as possible. I readily concede, however, that doing so can at times be very difficult. Yet one's growth in all dimensions of one's being, will not be accomplished without doing so.

Remembering AIDS

I still remember my very first AIDS/HIV test as if it happened only yesterday. I hadn't done anything on the list of dangerous sexual activity, but was advised that checking every six months or at least yearly was wise. At the time, testers were required to report every positive result to various governmental entities, which in some cases lead to losing housing, employment, or essential services, so I was actually encouraged to use a pseudonym (which I still remember) rather than my own name.

The added challenge I hadn't anticipated was that the tester would spend a half hour arguing with me to accept the possibility that by some tiny remote chance, I really might receive a result indicating I'd been infected. The test itself was only a minute or two, but the result would not be available for fourteen days. I walked out feeling as if my life was quite possibly over, but for the next two weeks there was no way to be certain.

Yet when I arrived to hear my result, the tester shrugged, said "You're negative," and turned to the next person. From one perspective, I was elated to be mentally free again to live as wisely as I could, but from another I had been mentally and emotionally victimized by the way the test had been done. So I could understand why some chose to avoid the test, choosing to live with uncertainty instead.

It was a peculiar time to be living, because one could be caught between so much being unknown and the surrounding world being so committed to ignoring the struggle. General paranoia served to further isolate virtually

everyone directly affected. Yet, the amazing and distinctly human response, were the thousands and perhaps even millions of people who responded with unconditional love, mobilizing a virtual army of supportive response.

Where countless individuals had initially been forced to grieve without being touched, intelligent health practices were taught, learned, and strictly practiced so that love was once again stronger than fear. The most inspirational response, at least to me, was the NAMES Project AIDS quilt, that incorporated a panel measuring six feet by three feet (the size of a grave) for each person included. After a display that covered the entire Mall in Washington, DC, from the Lincoln Monument to the congressional legislature, the quilt quickly became too large to ever again be displayed in its entirety.

The last cumulative global death toll I was able to find on the Internet reported thirty-two million--far beyond any other disease in human history as well as any war that has ever been fought. Within some villages in Africa, I'm told that only children are left and that all of the adults are gone. Yet there are still countless individuals striving to pretend none of this ever happened.

On a personal level, love made things more complicated whenever someone became romantically involved with another, giving rise to the choice of many to commit to relationships unlikely to last--the realization of loving someone so much that every moment, whether many or few, was absolutely to be treasured and that love which could not stand with another through the darkest moments of most intense struggle, may not truly be love at all. So in a peculiar way, AIDS taught what love truly is. My concern is that too many may have now forgotten.

Ultimately what AIDS offered was a way for humanity to dramatically increase in maturity, wisdom, and collaborative strength. Those who chose to fight the battle all alone, had the most difficulty. Many of those who chose to open their souls in love, however, became spiritual giants.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

Friends Taken by AIDS

There were numerous reports during the early days of AIDS of committed couples standing by each other to the very end and the surviving person returning home from the funeral to find that the unaccepting family of the deceased had changed all the locks and seized control of everything the residence contained. Definitions of family and community were thus radically rewritten and even friendship had substance that seems to have now faded. Perhaps this is part of why I believe so strongly, if one doesn't believe something enough to act upon it, one doesn't truly believe it at all.

The first gay couple I ever met, Stephen and Greg, were both HIV+. One died a short time later and the other may still be alive, but he and I unfortunately lost track of each other a number of years ago. To me, they were like the older brothers I never had and what they taught me about dedication and love remains foundational.

Another friend, Dan, was most encouraging, perhaps because his parents were both ministers also, and we might have become a couple at one point, except that financial resources were never adequate. Specifically because at that time there was no option for us to marry and he had AIDS while I didn't, he qualified for related housing and I had to find some other place to live. Wanting to honor the love he'd expressed for me, I chose to attend his memorial service in ritual garb and face-paint. His parents, both ordained Protestant ministers, were nervous about entering a gay church, but were significantly reassured when they opened the door to the sanctuary and saw Sister Who playing "Sweet Hour of Prayer" at the piano in the front of the room.

Perhaps the most pivotal loss, however, was Sister X, whom I met only two years before he died, but that was where this ministry began. He was professionally a freelance photographer, but more significantly a Cree Indian, and thus added those cultural understandings to this unique ministry. We met at the third occasion of the international Gay Games in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada and I was intrigued by his individualistic integration of theatrical attire, very developed intellect, and a particular blend of spiritual and social elements. I was concerned that my uniquely individual approach was a great disappointment to him, by developing in a

spiritual rather than political direction, until he sent a poster shortly before he died, made for him by members of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence in Paris, France, which he signed with the words, "Sister Who, I am proud to be your godmother. Love, Sister X." Particular lessons he imparted have guided me ever since.

I would not go so far as to say these friends and I were truly family to each other, however, because we were often unable to be as directly supportive of each other as we might have otherwise chosen to be. I suppose we were doing the best we could, while the world around us seemed to be employing a "divide and conquer" strategy that limited our intellectual and creative contributions to humanity. In each case, it was imperative to use whatever the present moment contained, because of how quickly opportunities and resources passed out of reach.

It was specifically from Sister X that I learned the importance of being dedicated to service, because being self-centered in any way is among the quickest ways to sabotage any good work. The priority must be not upon being noticed or recognized, but rather upon doing genuinely good, high-quality work. The measurement of my success is thus not truly within the volume of newsletters, television shows, photos, hikes, albums, and other creative works, but rather in the ways that individuals all around the world have grown spiritually in response to my ministerial contributions.

It was through Sister X, Stephen, Greg, and Dan that I saw myself as a moment within a much larger progression through time. It is specifically in consideration of future generations who may be empowered by my creativity, that I am striving to leave behind a large amount of creative spiritual and intellectual content. No one can predict, however, precisely what effects all of this will have within those future lives. So I strive to be certain that seeds have been planted for positive future transformations and thereafter to trust that the Divine will cause these to grow in greater ways than I could imagine.

Current popular psychology seems obsessed with asking if one is happy, but I wasn't put here to be happy, to accumulate money, or even to have a home. I was put here to serve personal and spiritual growth, so this is what I strive to do.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

Responses to AIDS

Somewhere near the beginning, I remember hearing suggestions that people with AIDS should be quarantined, but perhaps because the majority of early cases involved a devalued and marginalized population that no one seemed to think would affect the rest of humanity, this idea never seemed to be very seriously regarded. Yet what virtually no one imagined was how much AIDS would awaken true humanity, which curiously burst into view at same the time that I saw a few magazine articles suggesting that aging itself could be viewed as a disease and that immortality could thus be pursued as a reasonable long-term goal. With the discovery of what eventually was named AIDS/HIV, Medical science was confounded and humanity was humbled, but thousands of individuals began to remember to love and to put commitment into action.

It is highly unlikely that a list of all of the supportive organizations and actions that exploded at the grass-roots level of humanity, could fit within this newsletter. The government may have been very slow to respond, but many (although not all) of the families and friends of those affected were not. It was not truly about categories and classifications, but rather a deeply personal struggle composed of real names and faces unintentionally challenging helpers to engage with reality to a degree I'm unsure the current generation would have the courage and the dedication to tolerate.

Perhaps it was a wide-spread opportunity to remember why life matters and what must be done to make each life truly matter. Generosity of spirit and of resources surged. Creative approaches to inclusivity, community, and interaction multiplied. In a sense, faced with an overwhelming threat to its very existence, life instead reinvented itself.

It must also be remembered that not all of the responses were legally sanctioned. A conspicuous example some may still remember (much better than I do), would be the time that demonstrators shut down highway I-25 during the morning rush hour with a banner about

AIDS that stretched across the entire width of the multi-lane highway. Some demonstrators would ask, "Where is your outrage," while highlighting how very uncivilized apathy and being without compassion are (an opinion I now often have in response to nationwide problems of homelessness).

In some ways, moving AIDS into public discussion was analogous to "coming out" as gay or lesbian, of which it had been said that "the love which could not speak its name had become the love which would not shut up." It was ultimately not a matter of social propriety, but rather of redefining and bringing to full consciousness, the meaning of being truly human. A great many people seem more concerned with living the length of their lives than with living the breadth and depth.

Perhaps among the qualities that make me unique, which may have been extensions of autism within me long before it was diagnosed, is my unwillingness to settle for dishonest solutions that don't truly work. The unsung heroes within the AIDS epidemic, I suggest were the doctors and researchers who relentlessly searched for effective treatments, going through more possibilities, iterations, and attempts that I could count. Some were partially effective, but created other problems, such that it was not a question of whether one would soon be dead but only of how and why.

To have mandated a single solution for everyone would have been genocide, because there were far too many individual variables to make any such approach recommendable. In a very real way, doctors were challenged to pay attention to the details of their patients and to work toward what was genuinely effective and not merely the popular response of the particular moment. For many, very specific disinfection protocols became part of daily life.

Remembering that the epidemic of AIDS has never ended, the peculiar challenge some faced when six months to live was predicted and the response was to cash a life insurance policy and enjoy what time was left, was that they were still alive. It seems no matter how any expert has tried to make life predictable, it never is--which creates opportunity for creative human invention, if one is paying attention.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

"Evil opposes any ability to truly, fully live."

– Sister Who

AIDS-related Reinterpretations

Perhaps the first truth which must be respected is that disease, health, and life itself are far more complex and individually defined than is convenient for current methodologies of mass production, conformity, standardized answers, and streamlined forms of supply oriented to only the most basic and common needs. Those who are unique, if they are in any way like myself, find increasingly fewer resources from which to create solutions to the challenges of individual life. Faced with even the implied accusation that their rules and systems are ineffective, many governments and administrations reduce themselves to being nothing more than bullies and dictators responsible for enormous increases in human suffering and oppression, in spite of whatever virtues and principles they otherwise claim.

Surrounded by individuals claiming concern for "social justice issues," my journey through academia as been frequently a reconnection with modern forms of hypocrisy, since every such issue one can name is inseparable from economic disparity, but both this and hypocrisy itself remain for the most part unaddressed. In theological school, I even directly pointed out to administrators that the biblical Jesus was more opposed to hypocrisy than to any other sin one could name, without exception, but there was not a single course within its curriculum which addressed this, also advising of possible responses to this unhealthy dynamic that extends far beyond any ideological boundary Christianity. Addressing both hypocrisy and economic disparity, ultimately brings holistic health to the collective body of humanity.

It is unlikely that AIDS or any other disease will be the last epidemic humanity ever faces, perhaps because it is by being presented with such challenges that humanity is collectively forced to take a hard look at itself and notice what too often it strives to ignore--and by looking grow in its intellectual, emotional, and spiritual understandings. Any other response would be infantilizing, preventing humanity from ever reaching any sort of maturity. Yet there are wonders within such development that transcend everything thus far experienced.

May one and all and everything, blessed and loved ever be.

On a Personal Note

I grow weary of hearing, "Almost there... almost there... almost there..." but unfortunately that seems to be the only answer available. As far as I can tell, the final submission of my dissertation will be sometime within the next few days, after which I will finally be able to post the text as a pdf file within my personal website of www.DenverNeVaar.info, for any interested person to read or skim through it. The title is "A Pursuit of Holistic Self, Using the Phenomenon of Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR), Sister Who, A Sacred Clown And Twenty-first-century Nun, And The Symbiotic Triad Of Holistic Health." The responsible department within the school had advised me that their intended date of conferral will be December 19, but I'm waiting to see what date is identified on the actual document before I drop the c identifying me only as a doctoral candidate rather than recipient, from the end of my signature ["Rev. Denver NeVaar, PhD(c)"].

In the meantime, intuition suggests that I need to create a 2021 holiday television special, but I am still trying to verify a possible location, before deciding whether or not I need to resign myself to a small livingroom set again, instead of using the new larger set constructed for studio production. After that, I will be creating a personal doctoral commencement ceremony, which will also be video-recorded and uploaded to www.YouTube.com/DenverNeVaar and will be the first time I dress in doctoral robe and hat to reflect upon this eleven-year journey.

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