

Story for World Aids Day Service. By Lone Jensen

How it used to be: The Past

What you are about to hear is not easy to listen to. Yet it is necessary. In this season of lights, in the glitter and glories of these holy days it is tempting to forget the other realities the suffering, the poverty and yes, that by now all too familiar story of HIV and Aids. So why should you listen? Because there are within these stories lessons we need to learn once again in our anxious and fearful times: lessons of compassion, of hope and courage. And another reason, always good for Unitarian Universalists, yes this is a problem we can do actually do something about! Thus we invite you to listen with an open heart, listen and remember.

We used to call it the plague back then before the illness had a name. It was something mysterious, something terrifying that would destroy the lives of young men, killing them long before their time. And it was mostly, back then and in this country happening in the gay community. Nor were the deaths easy though so many bore it with great courage. And then we named the enemy and now we knew at least knew what to call it: HIV first and then full blown AIDS or Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Our Unitarian Church in Baton Rouge, La sprang into action. We went en masse to fundraisers, mostly at gay bars which

by the way could have made a very funny sketch since many of our flock had never been in such a place before. We were to put it mildly: rather obvious! We were unlikely radicals in sensible shoes and suits who felt embarrassed when asked by the flamboyant and very flashy singer to please raise your hands if you are a heterosexual. Soon the epidemic hit home for many of us. People we knew well were diagnosed and died. The fear in the community was intense. And there was no medicine yet, no cure and no vaccine. Back then I was still an artist and heard about the Names project, the quilt that they were making in San Francisco where every single square represented one life lost to the disease. As this epidemic spread, the fear grew and those who had it were often ostracized and isolated. Some churches condemned the ill and called it God's punishment. As if a loving God would or could ever do this. Then a young man in our church, fifteen at the time, lost his adored uncle to Aids. He wanted to honor him and asked me to help. His uncle was an avid iris grower and had created several new varieties. He had also traveled all over the world and would always bring back beautiful and unusual pieces of fabric for his sister. So we came up with the image for the quilt square: an iris with a petal for every member of his family, each petal different and made from fabric he had once brought home. There were Chinese brocade, Balinese batik, French silk, Indian cotton

and fine muslin petals. And in one corner we put a golden cross for the church where he had once been a minister before he came out of the closet. The Names quilt grew so fast in those days and soon it would cover the entire Washington Mall and still it grew. When I was an intern minister at Second Unitarian Church in Chicago the very first funeral I ever did was for a twenty four year old man who had died of Aids. His own congregation had refused to bury him. I did another two such orphan funerals just within my first two months. Often the service was shunned too. So we had one faithful member of 2U who came to every one of those funerals so that there would some attendance other than the partner or the family. My supervisor kept a box of ashes in his apartment, someone who had no one else to turn to and so asked him, as his minister, to take care of his remains. As a chaplain I would visits the large hospitals and the wards where the Aids patients were often entirely alone in their rooms when even the nurses were afraid. Those who had the disease would hide it, out of fear, out of concern for their families. Our Fears can cripple us if we let it. But we can fight the fears with compassion and knowledge. Compassion overcomes fear. Love does too.

(Kellie then F.E.)

Lessons learned.

You have heard three different stories about this disease that is still with us and spreading fastest among women, among minorities, in rural areas, and yes among the over sixty crowd too. Yes we can keep it at bay, under control for some time if we have access to the right drugs and good medical care. But as you heard many in our world do not. Children are more vulnerable too.

The more things change the more they stay the same. As in the early days of the epidemic there is a false idea out there, that it is who you are that determines whether you get this illness or not. Not true, as you know, no one is immune. And sadly there are still voices out there that condemn the victims, voices that speak from fear and not from love. For us as Unitarian Universalists this is at heart a religious issue. Inherent worth and dignity is a given for everyone. We believe that humans hold immense capacities for goodness. So how do we keep our souls and our own humanity in a time of fear? We fight the fear with knowledge and compassion. The sad thing is that this disease is an utterly preventable tragedy now. Be safe! Take precautions, act responsible! You know how to don't you? No one has to get this any more. So let us talk about it. Raise our voices. And make access to care and to factual knowledge a human right.

There are lessons here that go beyond the issue of HIV and Aids. Secrets can and will often hurt you. A closet of any kind is a very uncomfortable and often scary place to be. When we hide a vital part of ourselves, we not only deny who we are, we devalue our own inherent dignity and worth. And close the door to the possibility that the other person might just accept you as you really are. With whatever flaws we have and mistakes we may have made. The power of forgiveness and acceptance continues to amaze and humble me.

We live in anxious times with war, suffering and terrors on the news and a very short attention span. It is a human weakness to want to distance ourselves from all the bad news. It is perhaps not by accident that HIV and Aids in Africa is covered lately more than HIV at home. Africa for some seems far away. But it is not. We live in a global village whether we will admit it or not. And the danger for all of us is that we will give in to compassion fatigue because so much of what we see on the news we can do little about. So we may close our hearts, we may turn away even from those things we can do. We can and we do educate our children about sex and drugs and responsibility. We can allow our souls to feel compassion and the natural urge to help those who suffer. Even though it may be painful. Because that is the way we keep our humanity. That is the way we remember who we are: divine

sparks of God's thoughts, God as a verb, God as helping hands. So when I look back upon the early hard days of this disease it is not the suffering I remember most. It is instead the hope I found when I saw gentle care given to the ill and the courage shown by the dying. I remember so many selfless acts and a love that would overcome all differences. This love was manifest in the children, the spouses, the parents and the friends who simply was there, day after day. This fierce love came out in those who refused to give up, who wrote, who marched, who agitated and acted up. It is through the act of compassion that we overcome fear. Today we still have a choice. Fear brings out the best and the worst in us. Let us choose the best. Amen.