

TRANSFORMING LIFE'S PIECES

Address by Pat Hoffman to AIDS National Interfaith Network's Annual Awards Reception, Century Plaza Hotel 10/19/95

I want to read a passage from the Conclusion of my book *AIDS and the Sleeping Church, A Journal*, which was just published by Eerdmans..

“Five years after [the] last entry in my journal I was a chaplain intern in a hospital in Oxnard, California, sitting in a circle with six men affected by AIDS, doing group *lectio divina*, a meditative reading of scripture. Candles flickered on the table in the middle of the room. In the quiet we were waiting on how God might speak to us in this passage from Matthew 11: “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

“All the men in the circle had grown up in faith communities. None was now church related. As we shared our reflections on the scripture one man rejoiced upon hearing good news in the passage. He said that all the messages he had previously heard from the church were of heavy burdens. Another man, raised in a conservative church in the mid-West, found the passage invited him back into the scriptures. Poignant for me was the man who frankly stated that he had had difficulty hearing an invitation in the passage. He had, however, in his silent meditation stayed with the experience of feeling blocked and realized it was because he was not accustomed to being invited to hear God's word for him. He told us it was the first time in a religious setting that he ever felt part of the circle, felt invited.

“I was offering this spiritual meditation group during the last quarter of a year of Clinical Pastoral Education, a professional training program for chaplaincy. I entered the program to develop skills as a chaplain so that I might bring some of the church's ministry to persons living with HIV infection and to the persons who love them. I also have a longing to help awaken more of the church to the need for ministry and service in the growing pandemic. (page 84)

When I was a little girl I used to visit my grandparents in Kansas. My grandmother made piecework quilts and piecework aprons, and dust caps. At her house everything was used and reused. She would take me into the walk-in closet and show me all the neat boxes of already cut scraps. I loved seeing the order of it all and how wonderfully grandmother was able to use everything. I brought with me this quilt top my grandmother made from scraps of garments from my family. I look at it and remember the garments of my mother, my father, my sister, and my own.

In AIDS Ministry I have the sense that everything in my life can be used: every sorrow, every obstacle, every loss, every success, every resolution, any wisdom, all knowledge, any tenderness, and my love.

I have a deep sense of blessing to be in work at this point in my life that can use all of me and that requires limitless growth. Every week I am searching for time to learn more so that I can better serve those impacted by AIDS. And every day I'm trying to more deeply understand myself and to put down stronger, deeper spiritual roots that will keep me steady in the torrent of grief.

I'm very grateful for the publication of my journal this month by Eerdmans. This was the journal I kept six years ago when I was first involved with AIDS as an AIDS Project Los Angeles Hospital visitor. The journal, though very personal to me, is also a kind of community witness. Several close

friends contributed. The foreword was written by Chris Glaser, who is here tonight. Chris is one of the many gay men denied ordination by the Presbyterian Church. He has, nonetheless, found a way to carry on a national ministry through his writing. Rev. Perry Wiggins, who is also here, allowed Eerdmans to include his beautiful prayer/poem about AIDS ministry in the section at the back of the book for prayers and poetry. Also included there is a poem by Matthew Garrison, a man with AIDS from Ventura, who died two weeks before the book was published. Prayers and poems by two fine feminist women writers are also included. And the cover art, *Agony in Gethsemane*, is by John Swanson, a Los Angeles artist. All of us, by the grace of God, have been able to use adversity in ministry.

The journal is a record of my experiences sitting with patients in the hospital and how I was changed by those experiences and how the patients helped me to integrate a greater acceptance of myself. I would like to read a portion of the final journal entry made on Sunday, February 18, 1990.

..It's Sunday morning again. Sitting alone in the silence with intermittent sun slanting through the large window just behind me, sun that traded off with darkness and showers, it came to me that I've found in the men I have visited the value, the stories, the power in the face of great helplessness, that I long to know are in me, as well.

I have admired their determination to be valued, to act on their own behalf. Images crowded into my head of Mark and Hugh and others who were proud of who they were as gay men and never pretended to be anyone other than who they were. And fleeting recollections passed before me like images on "fast-forward" of some of the men when they were angry or insistent, making demands on nurses. Those patients were doing all they could to act on their own behalf. Mark, insisting that the "damned beeping pole" be removed from his room. Michael dismissing his doctor and getting another. Acting on their own behalf and being who they were.

These men are gone. But they left me a gift...When they have offered me their stories, fears, hopes, they have valued me for just showing up - Pat Hoffman, 54 years old, with the body I have, the face I have, this human being, sitting with them in the gathering darkness which encompasses each of us, some slanting sunlight yet spilling over us for these moments. And in these moments we are still here, alive. (p.82-83)

We are all of us here showing up and bringing our lives, lives like this piecework quilt. **Everything that we accept and receive from our lives can be used.** Thanks be to God.