

Responding to AIDS with unconditional love

BY RON BALLARD

CONSIDERING THE INTERNATIONAL AIDS crisis, I've found that taking a prayer-based approach to the problem can bring healing to my own thinking that will ultimately help bring healing to the disease itself.

The acronym

The term *AIDS*, which stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome, obviously refers in large part to the whole issue of immunity. I've thought a lot about what really constitutes our immune system.

Physiologically, it's that capacity of the body to defend itself from infection by determining whether an intruder is friend or foe. But the healthcare community is beginning to explore the relation of thought to body, and may well come to recognize what is fundamental to the spiritual healing community—that bodily activity is essentially a mental phenomenon, not a physical one.

Spiritual healing, at least as it's practiced in Christian Science, begins with the understanding that quality of thought determines one's state of health. The practice of Christian Science looks at something called "mental anatomy." This is mental self-knowledge that involves the dissection of thoughts to determine their

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origin and quality and quantity, in essence to determine whether they are friend or foe, (see Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, p. 462).

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Science and Health asks: "Are thoughts divine or human? That is the important question" (p. 462). In

a sense, developing a true immune system happens when we draw closer to spiritual qualities that strengthen thought—such as unselfishness, purity, innocence, integrity, and courage—rather than to malice, envy, fear, lust, and so forth, which weaken us.

This passage from the Bible has helped me in thinking through this idea of what immunity is. It says, "Your life is hid with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). The *Christ* is a term that stands for our spiritual identity—it's a universal term, rather than a denominational one. The Christ is the visible expression of God's nature in human experience. By recognizing our identity as defined by something far greater than mortality, we find the natural outcome is that limitations in our lives drop away, and we embrace our spiritual identity more fully.

In elaborating on this idea, Mary Baker Eddy wrote that we're "... 'hid with Christ in God,'—with Truth in divine Love, where human sense

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hath not seen man" (p. 325). That gives a great description of immunity—seeing ourselves in God's likeness, created with an indestructible life, in an entirely spiritual realm.

Another element of the acronym AIDS indicates that this disease is something "acquired" and not innate. This means that it is an intruder and implies that it has no valid place in one's being. For me, the greatest spiritual healer of all time was Jesus, and one of the things that really impresses me about Jesus' healing was his profound sense that all discord is unjust.

You could say that it was Jesus' passion to prove that divine justice in human experience is everyone's divine right. Jesus freed people from the awful burdens of sickness and suffering, sin, and death. Because to Jesus, these evils were not the inevitable consequences of living—they were the impositions of human fear and misunderstanding. And they were correctable.

Moral stigma of AIDS

I live part of the year in San Francisco, and as most of the world knows, San Franciscans are no strangers to devastation. We've lived through a lot as a community. And we've done that, I think, because we know how important it is to work together. And AIDS, I feel, is not unlike the earthquakes that San Franciscans have lived through. You reach out to others through the same sense of divine justice—that it's just unfair that people suffer. And that it is God's will that Her creation experience the freedom that comes from living a life of spiritual integrity.

But in San Francisco, especially, there has been a moral stigma attached to AIDS—a stigma that makes

the sufferer feel even more separated from love—as if this disease were God's punishment for immoral or inappropriate behavior. And this concept needs healing.

The primary fact is that God never sends disease—for punishment, or any other reason. Knowing that, I honor the spiritual integrity of individuals. That's my sense of judgment of others. My teacher, Christ Jesus, encouraged me to "judge righteous judgment" (John 7:24). To me, that means to judge from a spiritual perspective, from a perspective of divine Love, which is really reverencing the good, spiritual nature of each individual as the real fact of her or his being.

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Mary Baker Eddy once observed that Jesus' wonderful healing works came from his ability to see in others God's own likeness, and that it was this "correct" seeing that enabled him to heal (see *Science and Health*, pp. 476–477). Now, obviously, as we look at ourselves and others, we don't always see things that are very God-like, but we have to look beyond mortal faults and frailties. Through spiritual seeing, we can begin to recognize the way each of us expresses God's nature.

That doesn't mean we should simply overlook those things that could be destructive to our lives. Parents, for example, because of their love for their children, point out things that can harm them. So spiritual healing does include helping a sufferer see what is harmful to one's well-being. But this is helping

point the way to more constructive living and must always come from a standpoint of great love—never from a standpoint of human judgment.

It saddens me that there are some in the religious community who believe that people who suffer from AIDS deserve what they get. I don't find that attitude supported in the Christianity that Jesus taught. Jesus didn't overlook the things that could harm others; instead, he gave them a much higher sense of how God made them. That's the kind of response I think spiritual healing must take. To me, responding to this challenge in my own community is a matter of praying for a clearer view that we are *all* expressions of God.

Battling "compassion fatigue"

Sometimes people feel that the problem of AIDS is so big that their prayers won't make a difference. They experience what some call "compassion fatigue." But you have to keep the goal in mind and know that every effort you make brings us just that much closer to resolution. If we're operating out of a conviction of the power of Love, we don't give up.

For example, for months we saw people giving tireless efforts at Ground Zero in New York, in an attempt to help others. And I believe that effort came from a much more significant source than human capacity. I believe that those truly remarkable efforts came from what could be called "Immanuel," or "God with us." That's what destroys compassion fatigue—a divine presence that breaks through human limitations.

And this divine presence is what relieves anyone of the false notion of personal responsibility in healing. Because no one who practices spiritual healing can be truly successful, I don't think, if he or she believes that the healing power is personal—that is, that its source is in human capacity.

I've seen some truly remarkable healings over the years, and they've all been accomplished through a clear sense of "God with us." And while it's true that one individual human effort probably doesn't seem to make that much of a dent in a situation like AIDS, any effort that is derived from the divine will *does* makes all the difference.

Responding to the world's call for help

I feel that I must live "for all mankind" (Mary Baker Eddy, *Miscellaneous Writings*, p. 294). Mary Baker Eddy's discovery of Christian Science—the laws of God—was no mere denominational effort. She deeply felt that her discovery of the method of Christ's healing belonged to everyone. I feel we owe it to everyone to perfect this spiritual healing in our lives, because scientific spiritual healing is not a special gift to just some people. And while some may balk at the use of the term *Science*, spiritual healing requires precise practice—practice that ensures a continuously growing understanding of God and the demands that God makes for what I call "unselfed service."

To me, anywhere I see our human family struggling is a call for help that must be answered. Mary Baker Eddy once wrote, "Whatever holds human thought in line with unselfed love, receives directly the divine power" (*Science and Health*, p. 192). I take that to mean that if we turn away, and never move beyond our borders of familiarity, we are unlikely to experience God's power to the extent it's possible. I often think, "What would be thought of someone who had something so helpful to give, but refused—out of apathy or indifference—to give it?" Maybe that's why, even though this AIDS epidemic crosses all social/ethnic/racial/gender/age lines, the individual cases leap out from the

statistics and require our attention.

One example

A case that meant a great deal to me involved a young man who came to my office. He had been diagnosed with Kaposi's sarcoma, which is a form of cancer that is often seen in advanced AIDS patients. While I didn't know everything about the disease, I was familiar enough with its symptoms to recognize it. This guy had a story that really tore at my heart. He was cast out of home when he was 13. He came to San Francisco and took up residence on the streets. He became a slave to all sorts of addiction—alcohol, drugs, sex—and somewhere

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along the line, he became HIV-positive and then developed AIDS.

Interestingly, he didn't come to my office looking for physical healing. He had made up his mind that he was going to die. But before he did, he wanted to get a different view of himself, or a better self-image. He had attended a Wednesday evening testimony meeting in a Christian Science church, and had heard something about God that really intrigued him. I'm sure there were a number of people sharing stories of spiritual healings that evening, but he really didn't hear those. He only wanted to know something more about God than what little he did know.

So when he came to my office, we talked a lot about God as a presence, a force, an intelligence, and not a superhuman or anthropomorphic

or manlike God. Something struck a chord with him about that, because he said that while he'd never believed in God, he'd always felt that if there were a God, it had to be something other than manlike.

Before he left, we touched on the idea in that Bible passage that I referred to earlier about being "hid with Christ in God," and how he had a life in God that was so much more than what he'd experienced over the last few years.

Each week, he came back, and we talked and prayed some more about what it meant to have a "life in God." After the first visit, we agreed not to talk about what life had been like on the streets, but to explore what life with Christ—our spiritual life—is really like. And he never spoke about the disease. Our discussions were all about spiritual growth and development. I learned so much during that time—just by journeying with him on his spiritual quest.

Some time later he became symptom free. Over the years, I've had many questions about his experience, because of the nature of the disease and curiosity about it—the fact that it's considered incurable. But the greatest significance to me of this case is what happened when he decided to seek a clearer understanding of God.

This happened probably eight or nine years ago. And while I don't have personal contact with him anymore, I have heard that he constantly shares his healing with others. Sometimes people end up calling and asking me questions as a result of what he says, oftentimes asking me to pray for them.

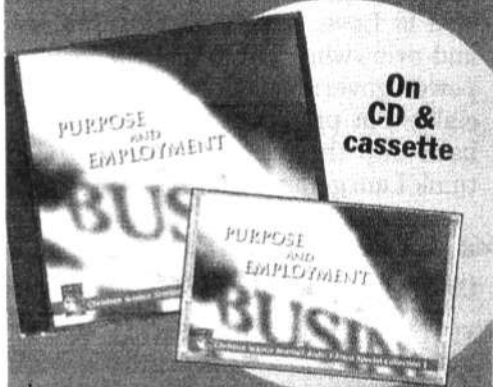
This is just one of many instances in which I've seen the truth of the Bible promise that if we draw close to God, God will draw close to us (see James 4:8). I've seen that over and over through the years in

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my practice of spiritual healing. Health is not really about getting a handle on some disease. It is about drawing closer to God.

Fear of AIDS

Another aspect of AIDS that needs healing is the dread of this horrible disease and the fear of even touching those afflicted with it. Fear is about not feeling in control—about feeling vulnerable and helpless. This is another way of saying that God is not present in our lives.

Yet fear disappears when the occasion is gone that prompts the fear. That occasion, whether it's AIDS or any other problem, can be turned around to lead us to discover that God's love casts out fear. That's really all that healing fear is about—knowing that God is unconditional love and is always present. No matter what we do, how we act, what mistakes we make, God's love doesn't ever move away from us.

The idea of perfect Love being the healing agent of something considered incurable comes directly to us from the Bible. Jesus faced this same dread and fear when he healed lepers—the diseased and shunned outcasts of his day. The AIDS epidemic of today spread in the United States with drug users and people who were gay. Once they were diagnosed with the disease, they were shunned more than ever—considered society's modern-day outcasts. Today this crisis affects children, the elderly, and everyone in between. It is devastating Africa and the Caribbean. This is a global problem.

Jesus often helped those who were considered outcasts. His approach to dealing with the outcast was to foster an appreciation of that individual's spiritual integrity. That's something that we can all do, whether we know someone personally who's suffering with this particular disease or not. We can all begin to build our

appreciation of another person's spiritual integrity—their oneness, or wholeness, as God's expression. To me, that's prayer. And prayer is about changing our thought—about bringing it in line with the higher view of what is true about our world family. This change creates a mental atmosphere that allows for more inspiration, more intelligent action, and, therefore, more opportunities to meet this daunting challenge.

True heredity

About four years ago I was asked to pray for a child with AIDS. The child had acquired the disease through his mother, who was also suffering from it. That gave us an opportunity to think about heredity.

We began to explore the idea that heredity, seen from a spiritual perspective, is not a handing down of a bundle of physical characteristics from a human parent. Rather, heredity from a spiritual perspective is a *divine* heritage. This child had a right to experience his spiritual inheritance from God. The qualities and attributes that made up his being came directly from God, his real source. And as we prayed and grew to understand this concept more fully, the child—over a matter of months—dropped all evidence of the disease.

It's clear to me that in every case, whether it involves children or adults, the real need is to recognize that everyone has a direct connection with his or her true Parent, which is our Father-Mother, God. While a human parent provides the encouragement that is often necessary to help us see our spiritual wholeness, the real qualities and characteristics that go into making up a person's being come directly from God. And those certainly don't ever have anything to do with disease, sin, or death. ✧

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