

AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) is one of many fatal diseases that in our time has emerged as epidemic. Simply put, it is the impairment of the body's immune system which in turn may leave the individual vulnerable to opportunistic illness and infection which in turn can prove fatal. By taking a moment to reflect on the grief and bereavement caused by this devastating affliction, I do not mean to suggest that other disorders such as cancer, heart attack, stroke, Parkinson's, or Alzheimer's, for example are less traumatic or somehow not as difficult to grieve through. Rather, I feel that there are so many other complicating issues around this particular infection that further reflection and care is essential.

Society often attaches a stigma to AIDS that can complicate the grieving process. Such a predetermination of moral judgement can cause attention to be focused away from the actual death of a loved one and unto a moral debate instead. Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome is a disease that anyone: male or female, adult or child, homosexual or heterosexual can contract and through a variety of ways.

Furthermore, it is not just a disorder peculiar to the gay community, nor is it only transmitted sexually. In fact, world-wide more heterosexual people are HIV positive or have AIDS than homosexual. In fact, the fastest growing sector of society being infected today in North America are young teenage and adult heterosexuals.

One becomes infected by the exchange of body fluids or blood products. Although sexual contact is still the main way this virus is transmitted, it can also be passed on through the sharing of contaminated needles among drug users, or tainted blood such as that which has infected many hemophiliacs. Hospital personnel usually exercise extreme caution when dealing with bodily fluids as there is a risk of contamination from a needle prick, for example. But casual social contact, such as a handshake, a hug or a kiss, cannot spread it; nor can the sharing of eating utensils, a toothbrush, clothes or other possessions.

There is so much information available to the public on these issues of transmission and infection, that it would be both unnecessary and redundant to deal with this topic in depth in this pamphlet.

The lens that I wish to look through is more concerned with the pastoral and human response, that of offering comfort and support to those grieving over someone who has died as a result of AIDS. Moral arguments regarding AIDS or life-styles I leave to those whose areas are their concern. Suffice it to say that God's love for people is without limits. God is a caring and healing Presence. From a Christian perspective, Jesus always cures in the Gospel stories without moral condemnation but always with gentle compassion. We need look no further for an understanding of the proper pastoral and human response to AIDS or any other sickness.

Religions and denominations differ over the questions of sexual orientation and alternative relationships. Likewise, clergy within faiths often run the gamut of outlooks.

This pamphlet does not champion one view or the other, but rather one urges a caring, non-judgmental response as that which is most appropriate. Perhaps in our times someone like Mother Theresa of Calcutta incarnates this attitude best. Her hospices for people with AIDS do not discriminate or sermonise against those who seek her help. She and her community just love and care for all who need help.

When AIDS also involves the question of being gay, some individuals or families may feel confused about how to go about arranging a funeral or memorial for their loved one. Sometimes there may be a double shock for example: parents finding out for the first time that their son is gay and that he is also dying of AIDS. Many families feel overcome by such revelations. But your children are always your children, that does not change. The love you had raising them is the same love that you must continue to show them even in sickness or death, or perhaps especially in sickness and death. Viruses are totally blind to labels of gay or straight, white or colour, let alone religion or denomination. The only response acceptable on our part should be that of unconditional love. Judgement or condemnation should not and must not have any place in our caring response. To do less is to admit that the real disease that needs to be faced is perhaps not AIDS but homophobia instead

As well, if the deceased was in a relationship, there may be a domestic partner to consider and include, in the plans and ceremonies. Sometimes this individual has already been appointed the executor formerly by the other. If not, then every effort should be made to include them in arrangements out of respect the choices and wishes of your loved one. Once again, reproach or moral censure have no place in our desire to honour and celebrate the life and memory of someone whom we have loved so deeply. You may struggle with or be confused by the non-traditional relationship that your loved one had but at least politeness and courtesy should be a minimum presumption. A domestic partner has a need to have their story heard and their grief acknowledged and supported. Often they were the one most involved in the direct care and support of your loved one especially prior to their death. You may even discover that the commonality of your loss may make you both a lot closer than you could realise.

Again, this pamphlet is not intended as a defence for or an advocating of an alternative lifestyle; rather it is an acknowledgement that an authentic spiritual faith must be at the very basis for our response to AIDS. Many people living with disease have found real profound spiritual peace. Questions of mortality clarify our values in order to concentrate on what and who are really important. Often our relationship with the Eternal One either deepens or is rediscovered. Clergy, especially those trained in pastoral care, within health care settings, are catalysts in this spiritual journey. Faith, Hope and Love are still gifts that bring comfort and assurance. Prayer, meditation, scripture, sacraments, and religious ritual all are invaluable supports before, during or after the death of a loved one from AIDS or any other disease. The Higher Power never abandons us, even at death; for to die is simply to fall into the loving and peaceful embrace of the God who created us.

Your clergy person or funeral director will be able to assist you in your deliberations and help dispel some of the myths that abound. As well, there are many support groups within the gay and straight communities that may also be of help. There is no need to be in ignorant about AIDS or to leave the many questions you might have unanswered. Whatever assistance you seek will enable you to deal in a sensitive and an appropriate way with your grief.

Community Resources

Depending on your locale, some support sources may not be present. A family doctor, mental health centre, hospital, social worker, counsellor, clergy or your funeral director can assist you with an appropriate referral in these cases.

The following are non-profit societies in Vancouver that offer services and support to people who are HIV+ or people with AIDS, their families, friends and caregivers. Other major centres in B.C. often have their own AIDS organisation. Consult your phone book or mental health centre for a referral within your own community.

AIDS VANCOUVER - (604 - 687-2437) -

B.C. Persons with Aids - (604 - 681-2122 ext. 308)

PARC - PACIFIC AIDS RESOURCE CENTRE - (604 - 681-2122 or 1-800-994-2437 - ext. 303)

POSITIVE WOMEN'S' NETWORK - (604 - 681-2122 ext. 200)

VANCOUVER FRIENDS FOR LIFE SOCIETY - (604 - 682-5992)

YOUTHCO - (YOUNG PEOPLE WITH HIV/AIDS) (604 - 688-1441)

HOSPICE - Supports the dying person and their family, before, during and after a death.

Friends and Caregivers Support Groups - A variety are offered through several community and church programs. Contact any of the above for more information.

Suggested Reading

There are many books available on this topic. The following are a few that I recommend.

AIDS - The Basics

When a Friend Has Aids

Gone... When Someone Close to You has Died of Aids

The above pamphlets are available through Aids Vancouver.

Donnelly, Katherine Fair, *Recovering From the Loss of a Loved One to Aids*, St. Martin's Press, 1994.

Shelp, Earl E., Sunderland, Ronald H. & Mansell, Peter W.A., *AIDS, PERSONAL STORIES IN PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE*, The Pilgrim Press, 1982.

Tilleraas, Perry. *The Color of Light*, Harper & Row, 1988