

Petey's Lament

*When we sit with a dying person,
we understand that what is before us is not a "problem to be solved"
but a mystery to be honored.*

Parker Palmer (A Hidden Wholeness)

It was one of those orangey-brown late summer evenings just before dusk in South Florida. We were sitting on barstools in Petey's kitchen. Our wives had just taken the kids shopping when he looked me straight in the eyes and said, "I've got AIDS."

Three words. Three tiny words that spelled death for my best friend and began my own decade of spiritual deconstruction.

This conversation took place in 1990, long before I became a hospice chaplain. I was a preacher then—an Evangelical Charismatic preacher. My wife Cyndi and I had moved to Florida to start a new church. In the previous ten years I'd helped start two other churches, and the plan was that I would stay and pastor this one. Within that faith tradition, the pastor was the guy with all of the answers. Pastors were expected to study the Bible so well that they could figure out most any situation by applying a biblical verse that addressed roughly the same ground as the issue in question. Or, for the really tough problems, you would get the answer directly from God. Folks found this method particularly impressive.

As a traveling evangelist, I was God's answer man. People came to hear me preach because I had all the answers. Or so I thought.

"I've got AIDS." His words just hung in the humid Florida air. I could not respond. Petey was the brother I'd never had. He was loud and funny. He loved to sing, and to cook, and to make you feel special. He was the kind of guy you could just sit down with and tell your secrets to. You knew Petey wouldn't make fun of you.

We'd first met Petey, his wife, and their three kids at a church conference soon after my wife and I moved to Florida about two years earlier. Even though we lived about three hours away from them, we became fast friends and visited each other often. Petey was a leader at his church, which was a sister church to our new church plant. Cyndi and I had come down that weekend because Petey had just gotten out of the hospital where he'd spent several weeks fighting pneumonia. Cyndi and Petey's wife had taken their three teenagers to the grocery to buy food for our celebratory feast.

"I've got AIDS," he said again, as he stared right into my frightened eyes.

Some twenty years earlier while on a church retreat I had gotten saved. Radically saved. I became a certified Jesus freak. Since then I'd studied the Bible (reading the whole thing at least six times), developed a life of prayer, and served as an assistant pastor and traveling preacher—but nothing had prepared me for this moment.

How could Petey have gotten AIDS? I asked myself. He can't be . . . Naw, that's crazy. He's got three kids for God's sake. He must have gotten some contaminated blood somehow when he was in the hospital. Or maybe they used a dirty needle. I read about something like that happening once . . .

"I've got AIDS." He was still staring right into my eyes. "I'm a homosexual."

It was one of those moments when time stood still. I was frozen. The seconds seemed to last forever.

As Petey continued to stare at me, a flood of thoughts came crashing through my mind. At first, I was so mad I wanted to choke him. How could he do this? How could he do this to his family? To his church? To me? Then I was seized by grief, knowing my best friend—this man I loved like a brother—was going to die. Then images of Petey having sex with other men came into my head, which really freaked me out. And, all the while, he kept staring into my eyes.

Petey told me he'd been molested by an elder at his Pentecostal church camp when he was thirteen. Petey believed this experience had unleashed his secret life of homosexuality. He was a loving husband and the father of three teenage children. He was a leader at his church. But unknown to anyone was the deep dark secret of Petey's other life.

As I say, I had been a born-again Christian for nearly twenty years and a minister for more than ten. Yet in some unexplainable way, I felt closer to Jesus than ever before during this conversation. The Spirit of Christ came over me. I got off of my stool. I walked over to my friend and kissed him on the cheek. I told Petey I loved him. I told him we would go through this ordeal together. We hugged and cried. Petey had been waiting for me to reject him, but the Spirit of Jesus surprised us both with tender mercies.

The next three years were horrific for Petey. He had a simple cough he couldn't get rid of. His immune system was too weak to fight it off. For three years he basically coughed to death. One of the insidious things about the constant cough was that it robbed Petey of his ability to sing. He'd had a beautiful voice and was so alive when he sang. Now he was always hoarse from the coughing and could speak only in a raspy whisper.

Over the course of those years, I watched Petey's body literally waste away. Petey had always been larger than life; he was a weightlifter and a health nut. I felt so impotent just watching his once vibrant body shrink around his bones.

Those years were filled with so many bittersweet memories. I was with him when he told his children how he got AIDS and about his secret life. The kids had never seen their dad so vulnerable. After the stunned shock, these teenagers lovingly embraced and forgave their dad as we all cried together.

Petey was with me at the hospital when our son was born. As I came out of the delivery room carrying Elijah, I will never forget the look on Petey's face. I handed my just-born son to Uncle Petey, and he tenderly held the infant. In those days, there was still a great

deal of misinformation about AIDS. One of the strongest fears was that you could get AIDS simply by touching someone who had the virus, so AIDS patients were not only traumatized, they were also stigmatized and quarantined. Petey just stood there and sobbed as he held Elijah. I was privileged to witness the affirming power of the human touch, as Petey held our baby—so healing.

The Christmas before Petey died, he and his family were driving by our home on their way back from a trip. Petey was in horrible pain, so his wife pulled off the freeway and they came to our house. Petey believed he was dying, but he didn't want to go to the hospital; he wanted to come to our house to die. After a while, we realized the pain was due to kidney stones. Petey and his family decided to try to get home. I didn't want his family to have to watch him in such pain, so I offered to take Petey in my car and follow them home. As we drove down I-95 in the middle of that December night, Petey was screaming out in agony, "Oh, God! I'm so sorry! If only I could have made other decisions. If only I had made other choices! Oh, God, forgive me!"

I was crying too, watching him suffer in such awful pain. I screamed back at him, "Why did you let it go this far! Why didn't you get help! Why didn't you tell anyone?"

He looked at me and simply said, "I was afraid. I was afraid I'd be rejected. I was afraid they'd throw me out of church."

I was so angry at the insanity of it all. My dear hurting brother was afraid of being rejected at God's house, the house of healing and reconciliation.

During the rest of his life, Petey and I prayed often. He made his peace with God. He experienced the liberating love of Jesus. Surprisingly, Petey told me before he died that those final three years of his life, even as he was dying with AIDS, were the best years of his life-- because he was free. He no longer had to hide. He was free to be honest. Free to be real. Free to know that God loved him just as he was.

If only Petey had experienced these things earlier. If only we who are custodians of God's house could learn to welcome all who are dying for freedom.

Accompanying Petey on his journey toward death, and wandering alone through the insane desert of grief after he died changed me forever. My dogmatic beliefs and memorized answers to life's difficult questions imploded under the emotional pain. I discovered (to my surprise) that even in this dark night of the soul, faith is not absent— just different. It's not as nice. Not as sanitized. It screams, rails, and curses the violence of death. One day sanity will return; homeostasis will be enjoyed again. But until then, the prayers of lament are faith's voice in the throes of grief.

a lament for Petey

a funeral prayer

where were You
as the skin tightened over his bones
and his voice
his lyrical voice
turned into that cough of departure
his voice
his life-giving laughter
turned into that damned rattle of extinction

where were You
when that pipsqueak tv prophet
proclaimed
AIDS is Your judgment on queers, faggots
and everybody not like him

where were You
as he coughed
and coughed
and coughed
himself to death

where were You
couldn't You hear

where are You
as his wife and kids groan
the desolate cries
of loss and shame

where are You
as that cold bony hand of grief
issues from my bowels
and chokes the very air from my throat

where are You
can't You see

and yet . . .
and yet . . .

the third day cometh
when Your healing touch will soothe
and i will trust You once again . . .