The Cheshire Chat

A minister warns: True compassion can't always be found behind that understanding smile

April 1, 1997 By Rev. Dr. Mel White

The hospital corridors grow silent. In five minutes, visiting hours will end. Since morning, you've waited. No one came. You're feeling particularly vulnerable when suddenly a stranger enters your room carrying flowers and smiling broadly.

"Hello," he says. "My name is John. Where would you like the flowers?"

You don't recognize the friendly stranger, but you've seen that Cheshire grin before; and though you're glad that someone seems to care, this man makes you feel uneasy.

"God can forgive you, son," the stranger says, moving toward your bed. "God can make you well if you'll only let Him."

Alarm bells ring. Sirens sound. You are entering the twilight zone where dangerous untruth prevails. Beware! The visitor about to sit on the edge of your bed may mean well, but he is a victim of misinformation. Don't let him make you a victim as well.

Like leprosy in the first century, AIDS has been falsely associated by uninformed religious leaders with "sin." Jerry Falwell and other televangelist types put two and two together and got five. If the virus is contracted by so many gay men and drug-users, they reason, it must be "a sign of God's anger." No matter that God loves gay men and drug-users as much as God loves the babies who are born infected and the celibate, cloistered nuns who contract the virus through tainted blood. No matter that HIV is just another ugly virus. No matter that AIDS threatens whole nations with genocide and that ignorance and bigotry about AIDS, like that being spread by many televangelists, is the real "sin" that leads to death. You can't reason extremists out of a position they didn't reason themselves into. The "sin" label stuck, and now we have to deal with the well-meaning folks in our lives who have been misinformed by it.

I don't like describing this all-too-familiar-scene for many reasons, most of them raised by my wise friend and colleague, PWA Lemar Rodgers. He is convinced the real problem for people with AIDS is not the random person who appears pretending to care, but the friends and family who promise compassion and fail to deliver. "We know they'll be at our funerals to grieve us and at the Quilt to celebrate our lives," he says, "but we can't be sure if they'll stand with us while we are still living, to show compassion in the little, day-by-day ways when we need it most."

Second, Lemar doesn’t want me to caricature all people of faith as intolerant when they aren’t. Across the country, members of conservative sects of many religions are beginning to understand that AIDS is not a judgment from God, but just another powerful virus that one day, soon, with God’s help, we will render powerless.

Third, my friend doesn’t want us to be afraid and suspicious of all the people of faith who may appear in our lives offering compassion. There is a new wave of caregivers from churches, synagogues and mosques, people of faith who are overcoming their ignorance and fear, who are taking this epidemic seriously. The AIDS Interfaith Network and my own UFMCC AIDS ministry, for example, are setting high standards for caring. Even those religious types who aren’t sure where they are about homosexuality or AIDS can be incredibly compassionate and, in the process, learn lessons from us that will change their lives and opinions forever.

In the meantime, how do we respond when we realize someone has appeared in our life -- stranger or friend -- who wears compassion as a mask but is really there to condemn and convert us? There is no easy answer, but we can begin with this truth: We don’t need to tolerate more intolerance, especially when we’re ill.

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