



THREE POUNDS TOO LATE

As the AIDS pandemic ravages Africa, one American woman discovers “life as usual” is no longer an option

by Valerie Bell

My Christmas list was unusual this past holiday season. I asked anyone “gifting” me to consider helping me buy cows for Africa. In other words, forget the hostess gift of wine when you come to my home, or the thoughtful Christmas trinket for my tree; just reach into your wallet, pull out some wads of green stuff and leave your donation in the basket by my front door. Don’t give me any lip or roll your eyes. If you love me (or even just like me a little bit) put your money where my heart is and help me buy cows.

After meeting a little Kenyan girl in a crushed pink crinoline party dress in Africa last year, I am experiencing an urgent need to purchase cud-chewing, ruminating ungulates! This growing desire for bony-hipped Maasai cattle is feeling a lot like some kind of a midlife spiritual conversion. I recognize the signs: social politeness and political correctness trampled by propelling passion, overzealous attempts to win others to my cause, unapologetic dipping into anyone’s wallet or checkbook in hopes of funding this quest. I’ve become a social embarrassment, a woman with a variant strain of Mad Cow Disease.

My cow obsession is symptomatic of someone who has gone global spiritually. Before the experiences of the past year, I would have said I cared about world issues like hunger, extreme poverty and HIV, but curiously I never did anything much about them. The world was off my personal screen, especially AIDS. As a suburban, health-insured, comfortably Christianized woman, AIDS always had a buffering “otherness” about it. It was the disease of a friend of a friend, somebody’s sad news that never required me to look it in the face or comfort it in my arms. AIDS’ face was the anguished look on hip young out-of-the-closet actors in Broadway plays like *Rent*. It was a storyline in TV and movies, preying on street types, infecting the needles of drug users and the seedy bedrooms of strangers. Like crime, accidents, or fires that destroyed other people’s lives, AIDS was one of many sad recurring sound bites on the evening news, the cultural white noise to the soundtrack of my own challenging personal life.

But AIDS seemed oceans and planets and entire solar systems removed from my world.

Still, as I examine all the “whys” of my unresponsiveness, I wonder how someone manages to ignore something as enormous as AIDS. While I was preoccupied with my American life, AIDS became, on the human devastation scale, what “The Big One” is to earthquakes. The combined human toll of tsunamis, earthquakes, floods and plagues pales

compared to the cost to humankind of AIDS. AIDS is the all-time Big One and it has exploded.

While HIV infected 65 million of the world’s people and AIDS killed 25 million, I lived a typical American life; I worried about my family, my cholesterol, and my weight. While AIDS orphaned 14 million children and put at risk millions more (the fragile population now referred to as OVCs — orphans and vulnerable children) I clothed, fed, and educated my children with attention to every detail of their lives.

All this from one whose spiritual formation embraces an element of “otherness.” Of the countless definitions of spiritual formation floating around, I most love Robert Mulholland’s: *Spiritual formation is the process of being conformed to the image of Christ for the sake of others.* This focus on *others* as the object of spiritual formation has challenged, formed, and enriched my life. Christ forming in me for the sake of others has softened my tendencies to mother impatiently, humbled me to count the cost my husband pays everyday to be married to me, and welcomed the unlikely other into my life.

But the others I measured my spiritual growth by never were oceans away. My Christianity for “the sake of others” was practiced on too small a scale. It stopped at the American shoreline. But lately, like many others, I have come to the conviction that my responsiveness to AIDS is currently the greatest challenge to my spiritual formation and to my generation of Christian believers. In the centuries to come when they speak of the stewardship of the gospel during our lifetimes, AIDS most certainly will be the yardstick by which our effectiveness will be measured. Every generation of believers has had its challenge: our parents stepped up to worldwide fascism, our great grandparents defied slavery. But there have been times the church has failed the gospel and looked away. These are the take-away lessons of history. In time, what will be said of us?

This growing sense of urgency was why, a year ago, when I was invited to “crash” World Vision’s Pastor’s Tour to Africa, I eagerly accepted. I was in a place spiritually where I was ready to be disturbed. I welcomed having my mind messed with. I was open to be shaken up. Africa delivered on all those levels. I had not been in Kenya very long



Valerie Bell (left)
with friends in Africa

before the hopelessness, senselessness, and obscenity that is that four-letter disease — AIDS — breached my secure American suburban defenses. The ocean shrunk and the distance between an insulated American woman and the pandemic disease that plagues our world closed. The “otherness” of AIDS was flesh for my eyes to see, a body for my arms to hold and a child for my heart to break over.

A journal entry from my trip searched for words: Saturday, February 25, 2006, Kirindon (in the Maasai Mara area), Kenya: *I have just experienced one of the most incredible, unforgettable, joyful, heart-breaking, frustrating days of my life. I have seen Africa. I have met AIDS.*

It's easy to be charmed by Africa. Early one morning in the Maasai Mara, we fill three Toyota Land Cruisers with American church leaders and travel through parts of this world outsiders rarely see. Bumping along we pass field after field where shaven-headed children herding cattle run to hilltops to welcome us with arms waving over their high voltage smiles. Such delight! I am easily hooked.

Soon, though, the exhilarating novelty of Africa and the high of our warm welcome plummets. Our vehicles stop outside Faith's house. Clutching a bag of hard candies I hope to give to children I meet along this route, we enter a lampless, windowless dung-floored Maasai hut. The tattered-clothed children of this home, in the traditional Maasai manner of respectful greeting (but with obvious reluc-

tance) bow their heads and wait for the touch of our adult hands. What a stark contrast to the exuberance of our hill-top herders! These children are cautious and sober, as if somehow prematurely aged. I realize that, even by African standards, these are children of abject poverty. *Oh God, are they hungry?* And while I process that too-probable possibility, we are introduced to Faith.



We had been prepared for this experience, although no class could soften the impact of that morning. For two days after arriving in Nairobi we attended classes taught by the passionate, articulate, brave

South African Christo Greyling, an HIV Church Educator with World Vision. Dumping his extraordinary knowledge into our heads, he emphasized not only the scope of the African HIV and AIDS problem, but reassured us about the difficulty of casually contracting AIDS.

“No one dies of AIDS” was his get-your-attention opener. He explained:

- HIV/AIDS is a misnomer. It is HIV and AIDS. They are not the same disease. AIDS is the final stage of a series of HIV-related infections/diseases.
- The HIV virus attacks the immune system leaving the body vulnerable to chronic infections (diarrhea, fever, headaches and skin infections) and opportunistic diseases (cancers, pneumonia, parasitic wasting away, tuberculosis, retinitis, Kaposi's sarcoma, syphilis, and other diseases affecting the brain and central nervous system). People die when the HIV virus compromises their immune system, but they die from other diseases.

- In the world, 13 women carry the HIV virus for every 10 men. 39 percent of women with HIV report their first sexual experience was forced. Tearing leaves a woman susceptible. HIV is a disease of victimization, accessibility, socioeconomic bias and anatomical opportunity. Although AIDS is sometimes a disease of promiscuity, for women particularly — with little control over their bodies — it is also a disease of no choice.
- The chances of an HIV positive pregnant mother passing HIV to her child is one in three. There is also a 14 percent chance of passing the virus through breastfeeding.
- Treatment of this disease is driven underground by the stigma surrounding it. AIDS spreads when people go undiagnosed and untreated. Stigma fuels the explosion of AIDS. It is this evil disease's best ally.

Then Christo added the kicker which humanized that statistical world. Twenty years ago, after receiving blood transfusions for hemophilia, he too had been infected with the HIV virus. He showed us pictures of his beautiful HIV-negative daughters conceived under these conditions and of his healthy wife. We were blown away. We also understood that we would not casually contract AIDS while we were in Africa.

That morning, with Christo's teaching emboldening us, we leave the classroom and enter the field. “Faith” is our introduction to AIDS. They've dressed her for our visit in her best — a pink crumpled crinoline party dress. I'd guess it was vintage missionary barrel, circa 1950s. Really, I could have worn that dress as a child. She is stoic, as if the spark of life has been sucked

from her small body. Her eyes are dulled by fever. Her too-thin arms and legs dangle limply from her body. Clearly, she is failing.

Fiona, a World Vision staffer, fills in this little girl's story. Faith's mother and father had both died from AIDS, leaving four children including Faith who was infected with HIV. Maritha, Faith's twenty-something older sister, herself a mother of four, took in her four orphaned siblings. Maritha's husband was wealthy by Maasai standards. He owned a herd of more than 200 cattle, plus many sheep and goats. But he felt strongly stigmatized by Faith's HIV presence in their home. Soon he forced his wife to choose between himself — with the security and support he provided — and her orphaned brothers and sisters. Maritha chose her siblings. Consequences quickly followed: he abandoned them, taking all their cows, a Maasai's primary source of income and food. Putting his family behind him, he moved to another village and started a new family. Maritha receives no help from him. Without a source of income she struggles to provide for her family of eight children.

Holding Faith in her arms, Fiona finishes this family's dire story with Faith's medical prognosis — this four-year-old weighs only 16 pounds. Unfortunately, Faith is three pounds too underweight to be considered a candidate for anti-retroviral treatment. As I scan the circle of adult faces in that dank and dark place the emotion we share is the same unspoken frustration. All the king's horses and all the king's men, all our combined church and personal resources will not save this child. We are three pounds too late! Faith is dying.

If I say that, to a person, we ache to comfort this child, it is an enormous understatement. She is hand-

ed to me first and comes without protest, as if all fight is gone. Every maternal cell in me wants to comfort, pray and sing into that darkness, "Jesus loves you this I know. . . ." I try to make my moments with her count. Massaging her hot little head and molding her weak body to my own, I rock and bend towards her ear, whispering words I know she can't understand, but hopefully have something of the comfort of a mother in them. She neither protests nor responds.

Soon others take her from me and they too try to find words to express what is unspeakable.

It is time for us to leave and we say goodbye to Maritha with great reluctance. As we start towards our vehicles, I linger behind for a moment. Pressing my entire bag of candies into Maritha's hands, I ask Fiona to translate for me. "Maritha, you are an inspiring and courageous young woman. Give these candies to Faith. Who knows? Maybe it will help. I wish it was more. It's all I have right now." This exhausted mother manages a nod of acknowledgement, but she and I both know that candy is no match for AIDS. My gesture is outrageously impotent, but it is all I have.

Later that night, writing in my journal I find the words that had escaped me earlier that day: *Oh, resigned little girl. I hate this disease and how it's reduced you. And that dress! We used to call that a "twirling" dress. I wish I'd seen you in it dancing and laughing with dizziness. Pink crinoline dresses were meant for partying, not for dying in — just as four-year-old girls were meant to scatter the magic of their laughter and joy into the world, not to break our hearts with your suffering. It's so twisted.*

Your mother ... I can't stop thinking about your mother. Did you

ever know her? When she looked at you did you see pride and joy in her eyes or overhear her say to your father, "We make such beautiful little girls?" But how would you know these things? You never really had a chance to be a daughter, or to really be four.

I am so overwhelmingly sorry. What kind of a world is it that can be three pounds too late and never know it? There should never be a "three pounds too late."

A month passes and I am back home in Chicago when I receive this e-mail from Kirindon, Kenya. "It is with sorrow that I inform you that the little girl, Faith, who was living with HIV/AIDS, lost the battle over her life on Thursday, 16 March 2006. She developed opportunistic complications and was rushed to the hospital, but, unfortunately, she passed away. It is indeed a sad happening, but we pray for God to comfort Maritha and her family."

Soon it will be a year since I met Faith and I have not been able to shake off that little girl. Nor do I want to. Faith ... her name haunts me. When her mother gave her that Christian name was she aware that Scripture describes faith as "The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1 KJV)? Is it possible that a dying Maasai mother clung to a last hope for divine intervention? Beyond what she could see, against all evidence to the contrary, did she pray for God to shrink the ocean and bring help to her little girl? Did she hang on to God's love even when help didn't come? Did her faith in God hold, despite evidence to the contrary? It's like a prayer from a mother's grave — a protest against the darkness and suffering of an AIDS-plagued world.

I consider how the e-mail ended, "We are praying for God to comfort

Maritha and her children.” That phrase is close to being nothing more than a Christian cliché; so why am I hearing it as a continued prompting from God for me to be the answer to someone’s prayers? I want to help Maritha feed her seven remaining hungry children, to be the evidence of faith in the world, to put flesh on “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”

We are living in the age of HIV and AIDS. The statistics are indisputable. The cold hard facts are that we’ve have been “three pounds too late” 25 million times! We’ve been using candy to thwart a killer when we needed to pull out the biggest guns we had for the most threatening battle human kind has ever faced.

Still, I am hopeful because I believe we can all do something! That’s why these days I’m all about cows, cows, cows. I’m praying for cows, scheming for cows, saving for cows. I realize this bovine link in the fight against AIDS may seem strange,

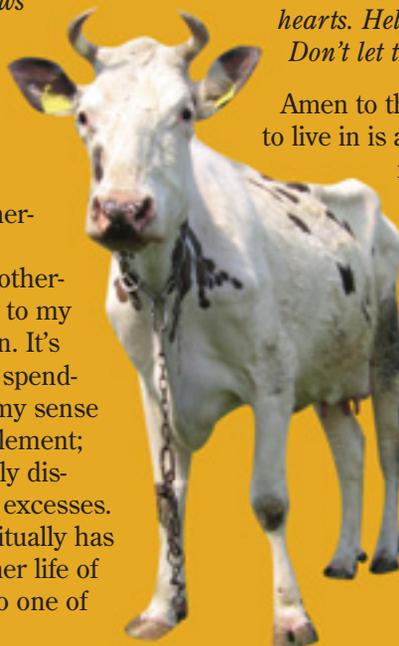
but in the Maasai culture cattle are the economic, food and life sustaining foundation. In other cultures, the battle against AIDS may start very differently, but for the Maasai, eliminating the AIDS pandemic begins with basic life sustenance. Over and over I challenge myself: *What do you really want, Valerie? This item ... or cows for Africa? This purchase ... or never to be three pounds too late again?*

The buffering otherness of AIDS has morphed into an otherness that’s linked to my spiritual formation. It’s messing with my spending; challenging my sense of American entitlement; and creating a holy distaste for my life’s excesses. Going global spiritually has changed my former life of impotent care into one of

urgent response.

Faith. It’s a name that is a mother’s hopeful prayer. I have no doubt it reflects the most common prayer God hears in our 21st century world, a version of hope, repeated by the world’s 63 million HIV and AIDS sufferers over and over again. *Dear God. Send help. Open their hearts. Help them to show up. Don’t let them answer too late.*

Amen to that. The world I want to live in is a world where there no longer is any such thing as three pounds too late. Like Faith’s mother, I have faith to believe it is possible, even if today I can’t see how. I’m holding to the possibilities of a divine intervention. Like a growing number of others, I am hoping to learn how to play my part. |w



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Do Something

Five things anyone can do right now to impact AIDS

by Valerie Bell

1

Find a world issue that resonates with you.

There's a very good chance it's AIDS related. Are you bothered by the numbers who are OVCs — i.e. AIDS' orphans and vulnerable children? Does making antiretroviral drugs affordable appeal to you? Would you like to provide means for widows to support their families? Is education, including AIDS education, an important starting point in your thinking? Do community development projects — wells, medical clinics, and schools, sustainable food and micro-enterprises make sense to you? Would sponsoring a child infected or impacted by the AIDS pandemic be the kind of commitment your entire family could make?

When your heart's troubled by an injustice in the world, engage the pain, linger there, lean into it, don't quickly dismiss it and move on. Follow that trail: Read more about it. Go on the Web. Cut out magazine articles. Do some research. Expose yourself to the truth. Live in the angst. Allow yourself to be increasingly disturbed. God may be speaking to you. Don't short circuit that process.

Give. Earmark personal funds for your cause.

Financing a cause is not a problem for some people. For others, it may be a struggle, but monies can be found. Consider both cutting back spending and increasing earnings.

What habitual perks could you limit in order to shake out some funds for something more important to you? Think double lattes, salon services, magazine subscriptions, shopping/spending as entertainment, first-run movies, eating out, travel, holiday decorating, etc.

As you wrestle with your spending, become an informed consumer. Weigh the financial difference between basic and luxury purchasing. Certain items like designer clothing, shoes, handbags, and luxury automobiles come with a built-in status tax. Whether the quality difference is perceived or real is a highly individualized decision, but one worth weighing with your purchasing power. Good stewardship trumps all.

I was surprised to learn that the cosmetic surgery business alone in this country is a \$15 billion industry, in which two-thirds of its customers are made up of people earning less than \$50,000. I'm not sure how that math works. Actually, it doesn't! I'm not saying cosmetic surgery is immoral, or that this is rampant among Christian women, or even that I'm immune to this pull to controlled aging; but developing a little distaste and distance from a culture that chooses Botox over antiretroviral treatments for dying children can't be a bad thing in my thinking. Set up a "matching fund" for all cosmetic and personal upkeep spending — i.e. a dollar for me, a dollar for my cause, that sort of approach. Let your conscience guide you.

Next, explore ways to make extra money. Set aside proceeds from garage sales, stock sales, or extra work assignments. Can you give lessons in an area of expertise? Perhaps cooking lessons, gardening consultations, woodworking projects, piano lessons, computer services, or specialized tutoring of any kind!

Get creative — a Malawi bake sale, an Ethiopian garage sale ... whatever. I ran into a Gulu Walk in California recently. A young man organized this walk to raise awareness about the 25,000 kidnapped children of northern Uganda (Gulu) who have been brutally forced into becoming child soldiers. With 150 walkers' pledges he also raised \$15,000 for this cause. Such out-of-the-box thinking for great causes can go a long way.



3

Re-think “gifting.” Redeeming our giving patterns could release tons of money for better purposes. Here are a couple of examples:

In a creative twist on giving recently, the Willow Creek Association’s Conference Operations Department decided not to “perk” their banquet guests, all ministry partners, with the usual Willow logo gifts — gym bags, tennis shirts, stadium blankets, mugs. Instead, they explained they had made an “executive decision” to use those budgeted monies in their guests’ name to scholarship a worthy Zambian college student. The money that would have been spent on Willow-branded “tchotchkes” for that one event alone was enough to send this young person through college! The 300 ministry partner guests warmly received and applauded this decision as an excellent choice and money well-spent.

What if this “gifting” in someone’s name for a good cause, instead of typical business perks, caught on in the corporate world? It would be amazing! Corporate America, not-for-profit America, plus much of the personal giving in our country are generally untapped sources for creative giving.

Another example: In 2004, a teenage girl facing a liver transplant asked that, in lieu of people giving her the usual teddy bears and gifts, people instead make a financial gift to her online charity. These gifts were then handed over to an organization working with AIDS orphans. Two liver transplants and an operation for complications later, this 13-year-old girl has raised approximately \$50,000 for her cause.

Strengthen Empathy. While I was visiting in Kirindon, Kenya, the people we met kept saying, “Do not forget us.” I can only guess that with 1.6 million short-term missionaries visiting across the world every year, many of us do go home, get involved in our personal lives, and forget.

I, too, felt the “fading” on my return. That’s why I began certain practices that simply help me remember and stay engaged. These empathy builders work whether you have ever crossed the ocean or not.

AIDS, poverty and hunger are closely linked problems in our world. With that in mind, I set aside a day or two a month to experience hunger. I am not fasting, just waiting to eat until my stomach is knotted and growling. On these days, I am voluntarily remembering that for 34.6 million people hunger is a daily issue. When two or three of these hunger days are strung together, it’s really hard to wake up and face the hunger issue again. Yet, that is what so many experience daily. On the days when I am hungry, I am most prone to wonder if Maritha and her children have food. Hunger reminds me to pray. Prayer reminds me to act.

Also, I am voluntarily going without. Instead of running to the mall to satisfy every urge, I am shopping in my own closet, finding resourceful clothing combinations and going without “new.” Instead of throwing money at a problem, I am discovering new ways to get a job done. I am speaking “Enough” into the part of me that says “More.”

Why go to these places of voluntary need? To disengage certain strong holds on my life. But also to remember. To stir up feelings. To take on the struggles of other peoples’ lives. To keep me engaged and moved to act. I’ve discovered that I am much more apt to act on my feelings than on my thoughts alone.

4

5

Influence, Inspire, Organize. Can you gather a tribe around you of like-hearted people and find some extra resources? Talk about what you are learning. Model your giving openly. Let others be inspired by your life. Invite them to join.

We can influence the usual streams of people — our families, our small groups, those in our church. But many in our lives are outside any kind of regular giving stream — our neighbors, our co-workers, our school, business, or corporate associates. The best exposure to spiritual life, the first step into faith, could be discovering what God is doing in the world.

What if more businesses took on a cause all their employees could support? How deep the learning curve if entire schools of children were mobilized to make a difference in other places of the world. Wouldn’t that be a “hands on” education for American kids? What could your bunko group, your gardening club, or your book club members do?

The only missing piece for many people to go from caring impotently to responding urgently is for someone to lead and inspire them.

I’m convinced that someone could be you or me.^{|w}

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