

night, was the typist and editor who worked with the brainiacs who were crafting the first US legislative response to the epidemic.

My life was changed by a father who came in to talk about AIDS. He was in deep, though well disguised grief, wearing a dark suit, no tie, with a fancy monogrammed button-down shirt, and wingtips. Except for the missing tie, he looked like he could have walked out of the board room of a New York brokerage house or the managing partner's seat at a cardinal law firm. Because our Legislative Director was otherwise disposed, this gentleman got to meet with me.

I was barely in my mid-twenties. This father's profuse apologies for taking up my time and his awe of our humble office convinced me that this man could have as much of my time as he needed.

His story began with some remarkable descriptions of his son. His son was a star athlete in high school, had gone to an ivy league college and done well, and then had moved to California to pursue some sort of career in finance. When his son came home for a holiday, over some formal dinner, by the father's description, his son announced that he was gay. What ensued sounded chaotic, loud, uncouth and terribly painful and resulted in this father kicking his son out of the house, for good - never welcoming his return.

After the father described this altercation, and I've never actually known when it was, but have always placed it as the worst sort of Thanksgiving Dinner table blow up, he quickly added that he had not seen his son again. As he understood it, his son was happily partnered with someone, soon became sick, was fired or left his finance job, and passed away. Whether the father had reached out and tried to make amends during any of that time does not remain in my recollection.

What is deeply engraved – burned into my memory was this father's tearful explanation of the purpose for this visit. He simply never wanted this to happen to anyone else. He didn't want the stigma and discrimination of being gay to result in not only family schism but in loved children dying alone. I've either injected, or he actually said that he had been in the delivery room for his son's birth and he would never get over the fact that there were no parents or family around for his son's death. This father expressed his grief and regret with such raw emotion, that it felt like he was describing incidents that had happened only days before.

Shortly after this meeting, and based on my conversation with this broken and grieving father, I was inspired to seek out volunteer opportunities of my own, convinced that I could be helpful. My exploration led me to the Episcopal Caring Response to AIDS (or ECRA), an

incredibly ambitious group in DC founded by an IRS tax attorney whose goal was to enhance the burgeoning HIV & AIDS buddy systems and programs by including religious faith – highlighting the Episcopal part of the equation, not just the human buddy connection. ECRA struck a nerve as so many of the people who were diagnosed and dying of HIV and AIDS in the 1980s and 90s had suffered discrimination, not only from their families of origin, but had been turned away, wounded or shunned by their churches and faith communities of every sort.

As an ECRA volunteer, I went through training, endless meetings, prayer services and one day was asked if I wanted to be a buddy for a Black teenage mother who had just learned of her diagnosis because her infant son had tested positive. YES, said I before any other thoughts crossed my mind, and I hung up the phone, took a deep prayerful breath and called my wise and compassionate mother.

During that call, I remember walking around my efficiency apartment in DC, twirling up the phone cord as I paced around and kept blathering about how I knew nothing about teenage parenthood and would need to read up and understand and study and- and - and, (read into this, I'm not ready, I don't know enough, I'm out of my depth, I can't do it, I won't be good at it. In sum, ...I am not enough)

Please know that my mother granted me the gift of generous listening, which was not always her first approach. She let me spin myself up and back down, and then quietly said - “Are you done”? I took a deep breath and thought, “well, I can give it another go, another long list of why-nots is forming”, but instead, I sighed “I suppose”.

What she said is, “[N]one of that is relevant. It all may feel or be true, but it isn't important. This teenager isn't looking for an expert. She is probably surrounded by them. She doesn't want to know the intricacies of why she became a young, not-yet-equipped Mum. She has agreed to a buddy. A friend, and you can do that, right now, just as you are. You can be a good friend and listening ear. She has all the other stuff. Be you. Get to know her. Be her buddy.”

That is exactly what I did. I accompanied Carla Edwinna Barrett to years of doctor's appointments, and held her hands through dozens of disappointments. I stayed with her and kept watch and vigil through hospitalizations and therapies, some of which staved off symptoms and some of which made her desperately ill. Throughout we experienced horrible heart-breaking lows and soaring, blessed, amazing soul flying highs.

Carla died in 1995, the day before her 25th birthday, despite my fervent and frequent prayers for her healing. Somewhere in the fog of grief, someone at church mentioned that I should

just keep coming, and I did. It is some of the best advice I've ever received. Just keep coming to church. Bring your heart break, bring your anger. For more than a year, I couldn't even fold my hands in prayer I was so fed up [disgusted] with God. Turns out God can take it.

It is among the privileges of my life to have known and loved Carla Edwinna Barrett for seven plus years, and to know and now be related to her family for 36 years - (more than half my life, just FYI). I've gotten a few of them to take an occasional sidestep from the Catholic church in which the family was raised, to walk on our wild side of the street. Our Episcopal faith invites a different relationship with God that begins always as love. We learn that God loves us in our brokenness and discernment. God loves us in our messiness and made us just as we are, in God's own image, for God's delight.

As Episcopalians in this season of Advent, God invites us to be alert and wait. We are invited to change our pace a bit during this, the darkest season of our liturgical year. Spend time with some deep and intentional breathing, and look around to see where God might be sending us signals. Whether you feel called upon to work toward a world without HIV and AIDS, or to making some part of our community more welcoming and accessible in anticipation of expanded use, or you simply need to be here with your broken heart and perhaps anger – your time this season can be both wonderfully peaceful and gently productive. AND you already have all the skills, knowledge, and resources that you need to make a difference simply by being yourself.

I think God would be very pleased if we even make an effort! If we are well assured that we are absolutely enough, as we are, and aware that there is work to be done. There is no better space or time to hash out what some of that effort might be, than right here, in the few silent moments that follow our sermons each week. Happy World AIDS DAY. Welcome to the season of Advent my beloved Episcopalians and anyone else searching for a spiritual home. Welcome. Happy Advent. Amen+