

THE QUIVERING HEART

By David Sawyer

I recently had an experience that rocked my world, and reminded me why I am dedicated to service. How was I to know, stepping off the plane in Los Angeles, that I would spend the week at the feet of a spiritual teacher? The man was such an inspiration, compassionate, full of humor, calm about death. His death came shortly after we met.

It was while helping direct a leadership-training program for 40 California high-school students last summer that I first met Maurice Metcalf. The students worked in groups during the afternoons with local agencies. My team of ten spent a week with men ending their lives at Chris Brownlie, the nation's oldest AIDS hospice. We grew close to Maurice. There was an air of holiness about him.

My teacher's story unfolded day by day. He was severely beaten on a regular basis as a child. He told me matter-of-factly that his mom used to sit on his head, double an extension cord, and let him have it until the blood flowed. At age 12, Maurice ran away from home, rescued his younger brother and sister, and lived under a bridge in downtown St. Louis; he raised money to feed his little family by stealing empty pop bottles and selling them for change. After a string of rough transitions, he tightened his act, started a business and a strong relationship, and made peace with the past. Unfortunately, the past had plans for him.

Maurice was an African American, a homosexual, a former heroin and cocaine addict, and, at the age of 34, dying of AIDS.

Every member of our group felt awkward at the hospice, talking with these men in various stages of terrible dying. One of the students asked Maurice if he resented what life had dealt him. His response: "I could have been born in Bosnia." Comments like that kept us hovering around Maurice. I felt a kind of radiance in his company, talking calmly, surrounded by the scented shrubs and towering eucalyptus trees of crisp mediterranean-like California. We shared an understanding about the precious fragility of life, elevated beyond the misery of that place.

We had fun, too. I had discovered earlier in the week that Maurice used to love Long Island Iced Tea, that nasty concoction of a half-dozen clear liquors. I boot-

legged some into his room, and our last afternoon together, we sipped holy water while the air shimmered. I would not see my teacher again, and we both knew it.

...

My leadership group had an immensely powerful experience that week, and we spent our last unforgettable hour together weeping. The Buddha is said to have defined compassion as the trembling or quivering of the heart in response to another's suffering. The brave heart quivers in the presence of suffering, and our hearts quivered that day. It takes a lot of courage to tremble, to let those bells toll for you.

As a program director, I don't do a lot of direct service now and this experience reconnected me with the raw and elemental forces that surge in direct service work. As we go about the modest business of daily service, we face the very things that diverted Buddha from the royal pleasures of kingship: sickness, old age, death. Sickness, old age, and death are clear evidence that suffering is the promise that life always keeps. Perhaps many of us are attracted to service for precisely this reason—because we hunger to know the reality beyond our cool, elegant cynicism; the truth behind the hip and humble distractions of kooky, modern America. I have developed a profound respect for those who enter that reality willingly.

I often have felt horrible performing service work, acutely aware of my privilege—my relative good fortune—in the shelter, the nursing home, the special-ed

The Buddha is said to have defined compassion as the trembling or quivering of the heart in response to another's suffering. The brave heart quivers in the presence of suffering . . . It takes a lot of courage to tremble.



classroom. There's a lot of talk about service being a two-way street; that it's more than charity, greater than noblesse oblige. But sometimes service does not feel like a two-way street at all. Sometimes service work makes me wonder why I have the skin color (white), the gender (male), the class background (secure), and the good health and education that make for success in this society. What right do I have to serve others? Years ago writer Audre Lorde helped heal my burden with a single sentence: "Don't waste a moment being ashamed of your privilege. Make it part of your power for change."

My next lesson would come from Maurice Metcalf. I learned that we receive much more than we give in service work. I had nothing of equal value to offer this man who was teaching me to die with dignity, humor, and compassion in the midst of unbelievable suffering.

...

I don't know why you do community service but I know why I do. I do it because I quiver, because I've been marked, wounded, profoundly impressed by the suffering and the courage of my fellow travelers. Maybe you've been marked too—by a brave child, or a sad elderly person, or by someone like Maurice.

If you are dedicated to serving others, consider yourself part of a growing service movement—one that I believe signals a tectonic spiritual shift in the United States today. This



BUDDHIST MANDALA
"OM MANI PADME HUNG" ARE
THE WORDS AROUND THE JEWEL
IN THE CENTER OF THE LOTUS.
THE JEWEL IS THE HEART.

Perhaps many of us are attracted to service for precisely this reason—because we hunger to know the reality beyond our cool, elegant cynicism; the truth behind the hip and humble distractions of kooky, modern America.

may be the very change we need, as we approach the scary possibilities of the 21st Century. The ancient Chinese noted that, "If we don't change our direction, we'll end up where where we're headed." Maybe the service movement is an indication that we are pulling ourselves toward the kinder, gentler image of a nation evoked by one former United States president.

Have you experienced the quivering heart? Wept at the unspeakable sufferings of decent people slaughtered in the name of a social or political agenda? Anguished with Burmese and Chinese students that fell for democracy? Despaired in the face of oil-slick seals and blackened shore birds? Trembled when a widow cats alone or an innocent child cries? Then you know. You've been marked. The ancient Chinese knew it too. They said that the hearts of the people are the foundation of the empire. If your heart trembles, you are one of the lucky ones. You can be trusted. May you have a big influence on the course of things. May you find the fierce joy of a committed life. Yes it is painful. May you know this pain, for it is blessed. 🙏

Dedicated to Maurice Metcalf,
1961-1995.

David Sawyer lives in a log home in the mountains of Kentucky. He directs a campus service program at Berea College and continues to search for the connections between service and spirituality.