

The recording

On Dec. 1, I remember my friend and all others affected by HIV/AIDs.

BY ADRAINNE GRAY

THE RECORDING SEEMS LIKE a macabre keepsake. I hadn't watched it since September 2021, when I'd baptized my childhood friend before she died. But I played it again before writing this reflection. I needed to remember the details of the miracle I witnessed. I needed to see Renee's face. I needed to hear her respond, "That's it? I'm baptized?" after I made the sign of the cross on her forehead. "Yes, that's it," I said that day. "You are baptized."

I remember the absurdity behind recording the baptism of my dying friend. It was not for me, not for Renee, but to satisfy her mother's fear of Renee's pending eternal damnation.

Her mother's fear that her daughter, my friend, would be eternally disconnected from God, was heartbreaking. Her Apostolic/Holiness church's doctrine of "baptism in the name of Jesus" wasn't that far from what church reformer Martin Luther



had written: “The one who believes and is baptized will be saved; but the one who does not believe will be condemned” (*The Book of Concord*, Fortress Press, 2000, p. 457).

Each day, Renee’s mom would anxiously visit, afraid it would be too late, afraid that her daughter would be forever condemned.

For 50 years, Renee rejected the holiness tradition and its teachings, including the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life through baptism. The promise of an afterlife never attracted her. What she really wanted, I suspected, was wellness and life in this world.

MY BEAUTIFUL FRIEND

In October 1999, Renee was my bridesmaid. She was beautiful, tall and healthy in the dress I’d chosen to compliment her rich brown complexion.

That same year, she later told me that “the only man who’d ever really loved her” infected her with HIV. She had given her body to her one-and-only love. But drug abuse doesn’t love anybody. She was just 27 years old. Suddenly, the afterlife was a real concern, but not as much of a concern as Renee’s desire to live whole, with dignity and health, in this world.

In Scripture, the Greek word that means “saved” can also be translated as “well.” When I replace the word “saved” in many Bible verses with either “well” or “wellness,” the Word expands, liberates and reframes restrictive condemnation.

In 1982, when Renee and I were in middle school, the R&B group DeBarge’s single “I Like It” was on the U.S. and U.K. charts. (I can’t remember the class in which I first noticed her, but I still remember every line

of “I Like It”). Renee was quiet, reticent and always alone. On the off chance that someone could see her eyes and acne-pocked face under the Jheri Curl hairstyle she wore, her expression said it all: “Don’t mess with me.”

That didn’t stop me.

We spent hours together. Over our lunch breaks, we’d write DeBarge song lyrics on lined notebook paper. Renee was still protective—of herself, and now of me. The only way she felt safe was to fight. Yet we could not protect each other from premature sexual exposure. As author Alice Walker wrote in her book, *The Color Purple*, “A girl child ain’t safe in a family [or a world] of men.”

We were in middle school when two things happened. I lost my virginity at age 13 because Curtis said it “would feel good.” (It didn’t.) Renee was gang-raped, and I was powerless to

DEC. 1 IS WORLD AIDS DAY

On Dec. 1, World AIDS Day, we remember and honor 40 million people who are living with HIV, as well as more than 42 million people who have died from HIV/AIDS-related illnesses. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, African American women are 15.3 times more likely to die from HIV infection than white women. As a church, let us never forget

those who are living and dying with HIV/AIDS. Let’s advocate not only for their dignity, but for greater access to treatment and research.

For me, sharing these memories of my friend and releasing the stigma of her status has been healing. While parts of my story may read like a raw memoir, our sexuality is a part of our physical and spiritual well-being. Nothing

can separate us from God. Being with God, and the people of God, should not require a dismemberment of our humanity. Let’s learn to speak honestly about sexuality in our communities. In doing so, as a church, we can work to prevent HIV, end stigma and discrimination against those who are HIV-positive, and reduce the conditions of poverty that contribute to the spread of HIV.

help. We couldn't find an adult that we trusted to tell—someone who would care about what had happened to a Black girl's body; someone who would know that even *if* she had given consent to one guy, *five was rape*. By the time Renee's daughter, my goddaughter, was born years later during our 10th-grade year, I had become used to intercourse; it no longer took a lot of convincing.

BAPTISM DAY

Sitting at Renee's bedside, as she drifted in and out of sleep, her body preparing to shut down, Renee's mom began to reminisce. "You never know who the Lord is gonna call to do his work," she said, laughing. "You and Renee were *trouble!*"

Thankfully, the hands that hold the sacraments don't contaminate it.

After Renee's stroke in 2006, her daughter found a drawer full of unopened medications—antivirals used to treat HIV/AIDS.

African American AIDS activist and longtime HIV/AIDS survivor Rev. Rae Lewis Thornton talks openly about coping with depression and maintaining her medicine regime. "As a longtime survivor, while a blessing and a testament to the advancements in HIV treatments, it is still a struggle," she writes. In 2024, she shares, her friend, childhood AIDS activist Hydeia Broadbent, died of AIDS complications. Hydeia, like my friend Renee, had stopped taking her antiviral medication.

"Medicine fatigue" affects most survivors, Lewis Thornton says.

When my goddaughter called to say, "Mommy told me to tell you to come," I packed quickly. In the rush of throwing everything in my luggage, I circled back to my office to grab my *Evangelical Lutheran Worship (ELW)* book, as well as a clerical shirt and collar.

I never wear my clericals in the U.S. I've only ever worn them when visiting churches abroad. There, it is more common for rostered church deacons to wear clerics. But that day, I heard the Spirit saying, "Take these things. Don't worry about what is customary."

I arrived to find a "baptism dilemma."

For three years now, I've kept the recording on my phone. Today, I watch it. The recording shows the morning light and nursing staff busy making rounds. Renee reclines in the hospital bed, wearing a black bonnet and the scarf I sent her from Jerusalem. The curtain by the bed is closed. When a nurse comes in to do vitals, I ask if she can wait.

In one hand, I hold a clear cup, typically used for swishing water in one's mouth. The cup is full of water from the hospital room's sink. My other hand holds the ELW worship book. I read aloud: "By water and the Word, God delivers us from sin and death..." (*ELW*, p. 227)

To be delivered is to be saved. To be saved is to be brought to wellness. Baptism offers us

salvation and wellness.

SALVATION AND WELLNESS

Understandably, Renee had a problem with salvation—perhaps because most of her life was lived outside of the morality laws of the church and of society. Salvation (wellness), she'd been told, was outside of her reach without this ritual.

When she reviewed parts of her life with me, she shared that she felt a lot of guilt for some of her actions. Some she wasn't so sure she could be forgiven for. She felt that her eternal salvation was questionable if it was going to be solely based on her "sins."

I won't recount our entire conversation about our understanding of Jesus and his life, ministry and resurrection for all. However, at some point, she decided that baptism was something she wanted. I, as her friend, administered pastoral care. At the time, I wasn't exactly sure why she had agreed. But we'd talked enough, so that I knew it wasn't out of fear or coercion.

DO YOU BELIEVE IN GOD?

During her lifetime, Renee fought a constant barrage of domestic abuse. Eventually, she gave birth to two more "girl childs" without the loving support of a partner. I left to attend community college in Miami, where I discovered that "educated" men weren't always safe either.

Today, as I watch the recording, I notice that during the Profession of Faith, she stumbles

over the words, “I believe in God the Father,” initially answering, “No, I don’t.” It looks like cognitive confusion. I watch myself giving her space to think about it. I ask again: “Do you believe in God, Renee?” This time, she responds, “I do.”

It’s telling that, for my friend, the language of God as “father” seemed stifling. Was she hesitant to trust a male image of the Divine Creator? After all, males had not protected her in this life; why would a male protect her in the next?

Womanist theology is a theological approach by African American women that focuses not only on ending oppression based on sex and gender, but also oppression based on race, class, sexual preference, physical ability and caste.

Theologian Monica Coleman, author of *Making a Way out of No Way: A Womanist Theology* (Fortress Press 2008), quotes womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant, who says it is not about “a sin that Black women commit. Rather, it is a sin of humanity,

the sin committed against Black women from which they must be saved [returned to wellness]” (Coleman, p. 424).

Grant’s words stood out to me. Had we, perhaps, missed the gravity of the sins committed against Renee’s body? Had we expected her to carry the burden of sin alone?

UNCONDITIONAL, FREEING LOVE

Renee died before the release of Beyoncé’s song, “Church Girl.” The song’s lyrics felt like an homage to my friend—a Black woman who refused to accept the religious rhetoric of purity and sinful women. Some might think that Renee’s decision to accept baptism was a final-hour change of heart. It wasn’t. Renee received baptism on her own terms. Renee was finally able to stop fighting for love and wellness, and at long last, able to simply receive it, unconditionally.

Beyoncé’s lyrics speak to Renee’s lived experience:

*I’ve been up, I been down
Feel like I move mountains*

*Got friends that cried fountains, oh
I’m warning everybody, soon as I
get in this party
I’m gon’ let go of this body, I’m
gonna love on me
Nobody can judge me but me,
I was born free*
—from “Church Girl,” by Beyoncé

Renee was released from her body on October 16, 2021—two weeks after her baptism—with her three daughters and six grandchildren surrounding her. 🌸

Read: “Unprotected: A Memoir,” by Rae Lewis-Thornton

Check out: The HVTN (HIV Vaccine Trials Network) Faith Initiative, a national program that includes Faith Ambassadors who provide information on HIV prevention, treatment and more to faith communities: www.hvtn.org/community/community-overview/hvtn-faith-initiative.html

Download free worship resources for World AIDS Day at www.elca.org/hiv

A virtual Blue Christmas Service

December 21 at 7pm CST

This virtual Blue Christmas service offers a safe place to bring your grief, fear and loss.

Register at welca.org/events

