

“A Broken Hallelujah”

Mary Fisher
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Thank you, Mike...I love you.

I never know quite what to expect when Mike is on the program ahead of me. He might render some profound insight about science and global research. Or he may do a song-and-dance routine from Monte Python. But no one is more responsible for my being here this morning, literally, than Mike. His research led to the discovery and acceleration of “anti-retrovirals.” And his spirit kept mine alive long enough for the drugs to matter. So, thanks, Mike – for your research, your clinical care, your laughter, your love...and for that generous introduction.

It’s such an honor to be here with you today. Some of you are, like me, HIV-positive. Even in this audience, statistics tell us that up to a half-dozen of you likely do not know your HIV status because you’ve not tested recently. But no matter our HIV status, all of you – all of *us* – are passionately engaged with AIDS. We know what the world has not yet recognized: that this is predominantly an epidemic of women.

Globally, sixty percent of new infections among the young are women. Women are disproportionately at-risk because of gender inequality and partner violence, family perspectives and societal norms, and because they lack equal access to education, to healthcare, to economic resources and to testing and counseling. Put simply, it is largely because of cultural oppression that AIDS is an epidemic of women.

Because of you, and others working with you, enormous strides have been made in the struggle for equality and, therefore, for life. The numbers and the percentages of young women seeking testing, and receiving both treatment and counseling, has more than tripled in the past decade. Morbidity rates are falling; the rate of interventions is climbing.

Although a quarter of pregnant women living with HIV are not receiving ARVs, because of you and the work you have done, three-quarters *are* now enrolled in therapies that block mother-to-child transmission.

In the United States, most of the statistics are slightly more encouraging, but the global trends play out here as they play out in most settings. And the factors that favor the virus over its victims are the same here as elsewhere: grinding poverty and various forms of oppression, subtle and bold, bring about lifestyles that open the door to AIDS.

Behind the story of the tiny virus and its march around the globe is a continuing narrative that speaks of violence and poverty. The inability of women to be safe takes different forms in different cultures. In some settings, early-marriage and poverty travel together so that the sale of a daughter is the only hope of a family; her death after her suffering is all but guaranteed. In other settings, sex tourism and raw ignorance harvest the lives of the young. But the two constants for women are, in America as elsewhere, risk fueled by violence and hopelessness nurtured by poverty.

In recent months we've heard bold and public claims of men who feel especially privileged. They apparently believe that proof of their privilege is their right to violate women. They confidently assure others that they are permitted to touch women, to grope, to grab, and do it with impunity when and to whom they wish. Their boasts are dismissed as mere talk. Their boldness is rewarded with chuckles, not condemnation. And so it continues here as elsewhere, young women are regarded as amusing playthings who exist for the pleasure of those with more cash, more rights, and more lawyers. So long as the spirit of domination and abuse remains, AIDS will continue to be an epidemic of women.

It's been several months since I have keynoted a conference. I've been mostly quiet and sad since this past June when my mother died. I've given myself some months for reorganizing and for reflection, all of it shrouded in that haze of grief that asks hard questions of my own life and its meaning. I'm not yet sure where I will head with what remains of my life. But I am very clear about what I believe has happened around us while you were devoting your lives to the cause of AIDS.

First, I must tell you: each of you and those with whom you work has been heroic. You have not stopped the research or the advocacy. You've moved forward with advances in science, and in the application of science. You've spoken out against those who say we have done enough, and you've lifted up tens of thousands of us who have suffered with, or are at the risk of, AIDS.

You've gone to your laboratories and to your clinics when you were so weary you could barely walk; still, you stood at the bench and sought another treatment, you stood at the bedside and offered comfort. You've reached out to those exiled from families and communities. You've told the truth, again and again, when ignorance flooded the media with deceptive reports that the virus had been conquered and a cure had been achieved. I cannot say enough about what you have done, and who you are, and why I regard you as heroes.

But while you were engaging in the work of heroes, I and others like me were becoming complacent. Perhaps it seemed to us that the American culture was becoming less racist and more inclusive. We elected a Black president with the improbable name “Barack Hussein...” We dressed up and attended weddings of our gay and lesbian friends. We saw justice coming over the horizon, and equality seeping into our neighborhoods. And so we thought we had won. We imagined that we did not need to march any further or protest any longer. We had lobbied, and we had won. And we fell prey to the smug confidence that evil could not happen here, that hatred was on the run and compassion was on the rise.

And then came irrefutable evidence that we were wrong, that what was seen in Germany a generation ago was dangerously possible here and now. We have not yet heard the goosesteps of an army coming into town, but we have seen the salute of White Power and wondered if the sheets of the Ku Klux Klan are being ironed for wearing on Saturday evening.

While you’ve been working, our naivete’ and our complacency has been ripped from those of us who believed all was well. We’ve been left with echoes of the famous retrospective of Lawrence of Arabia, T.E. Lawrence:

“We lived many lives in those whirling campaigns, never sparing ourselves: yet when we achieved and the new world dawned, the old men came out again and took our victory to remake in the likeness of the former world they knew. Youth could win, but had not learned to keep, and was pitifully weak against age. We stammered that we had worked for a new heaven and a new earth, and they thanked us kindly and made their peace.”

In the wake of this dismal assessment, I stand before you this morning to say that whether we have been heroic or naïve; whether we have fallen asleep at the switch or were buried in the work of science – it is not yet too late. The final chapter on our culture and our nation has not been written. We need *not yet* to consider the cause lost or the effort unrewarded.

My evidence for this is...you. You who have not stopped your research, stopped your advocacy, stopped your healing. You who have sacrificed careers that would have brought greater fame and higher rewards. You who have led the Centers for AIDS Research and all the parallel tracks of labor. You have answered life’s call to prevent the plague’s full return, and to care for the vulnerable, the sick and the dying. You are my evidence that we need not give up. Not now. Not yet.

To retain some hope for our future, I need to remember with you that others have struggled before us, and have won. We are not the first generation to face challenges; we need not be the last. But we do need to band together so that when the tiredness comes, we do not rest on false laurels. We need to encourage and support each other. We need to stand up when the weak fall down, and bolster each other’s courage in the face of fear. Most of all, we need to clear our anxious throats and speak out when others take refuge in polite and damning silence.

Maybe we need to remember Mother Pollard whose story was told by Taylor Branch in *Parting the Waters*, his stunning history of America during the years of the late Dr. Martin Luther King. Here’s an Alabama memory we might share:

“Early in 1956, the Alabama bus boycott was failing,” he wrote. “No laws had been changed; no buses had been integrated. No one was suffering except those who walked.

Then came a little-known hero from Montgomery’s African-American community, Mother Pollard. For untold decades she had cared for the sick and raised the orphans, black and

white alike. Now, in her waning years, Mother Pollard joined the boycott and walked. As the days stretched to weeks, and then months, she walked. When the winter weather worsened, and she began to slip and fall, against the advice of King and others, she would pick herself up, time after time, and walk.

A meeting was called to consider ending the boycott and finding another means of protest. The crowd was divided between speeches and arguments until Mother Pollard rose to speak.

‘I would rather crawl on my knees than ride on a bus,’ she told the hushed and now embarrassed crowd. She spoke of years of humiliation, of self-hatred, of injustice and shame. She noted that the outcome would have little to do with her life, but much to do with the lives of her many children. And then she gave the entire civil rights movement one of its classic refrains when she concluded, ‘My feet is tired, but my soul is rested.’”

After a quarter century of walking, marching, giving speeches and writing books; after years of ricocheting between the plains and poverty of Africa and Asia, and the corridors of power in Washington DC, I can begin to wonder whether it has really mattered. The forces of meanness and the voices of bullies are relentless, pouring out of social media with a billion data points an hour, driving me to cover my ears with both hands and want to shriek. The hugeness of “it” confronts the smallness of me.

This is the moment I come to you with two, two-word notes.

The first is “so what?” So what if I’m only one person – by God, I *am* a person. I can speak. I can say “No” to brutality and “Yes” to compassion. Maybe I can’t change the world this morning. So what? Maybe I have one lone voice hollering into a wilderness. So what? Maybe, just maybe, I could convince you to stand up and scream with me. Then one would be two. The impact would double, and my sense of aloneness would be erased.

And that’s my request, because my second two-word appeal is “help me.” Help me find ways to organize and to oppose that which denies justice and decency. Help me oppose cuts in funding for research and care, fight policies that favor those who are wealthy and White and comfortable. Help me find reasons to hope when the ground on which we stand is shaken by the thunder of fear and cruelty.

What I am really appealing for is leadership. If ever we have needed leaders who are willing to change the American narrative, it is now. We are desperate for someone clear and convincing to show us a way to sacrifice ourselves for others. We need someone who is more than tonight’s sound byte, more than a clever huckster; someone who will do more than entertain us with words telling us what we want to hear. We need someone who understands that the purpose of leadership is not self-promotion but self-sacrifice.

If we are to wait for light to dawn and leadership to arise, then we are going to need hope and humor. Without both, we are going to have a collective nervous breakdown and be of no use to ourselves or anyone else.

If you need a moment of joy amid all this dismal news, listen to my favorite story from all the years I’ve traveled along the road to AIDS.

In 1992, I’d given a speech at the Republican National Convention. Four years later, I traveled to Little Rock, Arkansas, to give a speech during the 1996 presidential campaign. I was clearly a Republican in Democrat Bill Clinton’s town.

It was awards night for regional folk who’d made significant contributions to the fight against AIDS. The room was packed with social workers, people with AIDS, family members, religious leaders, a few politicians and journalists – in other words, the room was packed with Democrats. Out of deference to me, every speaker had been very discreet never to mention politics or Republicans...until the awards were being handed out, and the last winner wanted to talk.

She was an amazing public health nurse: bright, quick, tiny, 77-years-old and feisty. And you could hear every politically correct person in that room stop breathing when she reached up, grabbed the mic and said – and I quote – “I’ve had it with them dumb Republicans.”

“For fifteen years,” she said, “I’ve talked to them dumb Republicans. Over and over, I’ve explained there ain’t but three ways you can get AIDS: swap needles or blood, have sex, or get born with it. And, for 15 years, them dumb Republicans been askin’, ‘But cain’t you get it from mosquitoes?’”

She paused for a moment, and then she said: “I’m tellin’ y’all tonight that, from now on, I’m gonna’ tell ‘em, ‘Yep, you can get it from mosquitoes – but only in three states: Florida, Louisiana, and Arkansas. ‘Cause them’s the only places mosquitoes grow so big Republicans can have sex with ‘em.’”

So there’s humor. What about hope?

I have come through some fairly dark moments in the past six months, beginning at my mother’s deathbed. I’m not sure that the dark moments are all behind me. But I have risen high enough to see that the final chapter has not been written. The struggle for research, for advocacy and for prevention is not over. I’m convinced that the call to justice and the urge for compassion has been battered, but not beaten.

Therefore, I believe that the immigrant child hiding in the basement, and the brutalized young woman hiding in the flop house, and the suicidal young man who knows he is gay – I believe that each of these is worth any sacrifice of our time, our passion and our lives. If they are hearing messages from their peers and Facebooks that tell them they do not matter, we need to deliver a convincing, contrary message.

And my experience tells me that these years of struggle will see a battle of messages struggling to win souls. I feel like an old-time preacher who’s come to town in search of a few salvations. But, in fact, I’m closer to the late Jewish songwriter Leonard Cohen whose most famous work is known by a cry of hope, “Hallelujah.”

Do you know the words he wrote?

You say I took the name in vain
I don't even know the name
But if I did, well really, what's it to you?
There's a blaze of light in every word
It doesn't matter which you heard
The holy or the broken hallelujah

Cohen had it right: “...there’s a blaze of light in every word.” And it is time for us to release that blaze of light in messages of decency, honor, inclusion and hope.

The messages of cruelty and discrimination will be dominant until, and unless, we offer a better alternative. We need, desperately, to put an end to our complacency and a stop to our complaining. We need to break out of our modesty with a sense of boldness. Our silence has lasted too long – so long, in fact, that young women wonder whether those of us who came before them have given up a defense of our gender, our bodies, and our dignity.

To all of them, I want to say an emphatic “No!” No, we will not roll over. No, we will not allow injustice to go unquestioned, and bullies to work without challenge.

We need the ability to say “No!” so loudly that it is neither confused nor silenced. Else, we cannot act in defense of those who are most vulnerable – which may include every woman on the face of the globe. We need to speak with confidence, believing with Martin Luther King that the arc of history bends toward justice. We need to speak with courage, because there’s a blaze of light in every word to eradicate the darkness of meanness. And we need to speak hope, because it doesn’t matter which “hallelujah” you hear: the one that is holy, or the one that is broken. Either way, it’s a song of hope and of victory; either way, it’s still “hallelujah!”

Words matter. They matter deeply. The language of bullies and of brutality is enjoying a return to popularity. We need a leader who is unfazed by such language, and unattracted to it; who is eager to demonstrate the value of every life. We need to cling to the elegant simplicity and glaring truth of “Black Lives Matter.” And from that message we must find ways to affirm that gay lives are welcome, that immigrant children are our future, that Muslim leaders are sisters and brothers, and that every girl and woman has a right to an untrammelled, un-groped, un-assaulted body.

When I first appeared in the national AIDS community, I was a young mother in a plague that had been characterized as a disease of young gay men. They might have used language to dismiss me since I had not suffered as most of them had. But instead of the language of

exclusion and ridicule, they welcomed me with words of acceptance and kindness. They invited me into their homes and their hospices. They used language to reassure me, to embrace me, to let me know that I was loved.

The power of such language is that I was kept from seeing myself as a victim; I learned to describe myself as a pilgrim on the road to AIDS, not a pathetic, helpless innocent. It was language whispered by Arthur Ashe, and screamed by Larry Kramer, that told others I mattered to them. And in their delivery of the message, I heard that I was not only welcome – I was also not yet finished. I had a mission. There was more to be done.

This morning, I come bearing a parallel message: I’m not finished, not yet. And neither are you. We women have inherited a legacy of strength from the likes of Mother Pollard.

It’s time for us to give up our whimpers and take on the challenge. We need not let the champions of cruelty win this day. It is no less ours than theirs, if only we claim it. If we stake out our message of blazing light as the message of hope and grace, then Cohen’s closing words can be ours as well:

I did my best, it wasn't much
I couldn't feel, so I tried to touch
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you
And even though it all went wrong
I'll stand before the lord of song
With nothing on my tongue but hallelujah....

[music]

Hallelujah!