

6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid* 50.
8. *Ibid* 164.
9. *Ibid* 165.
10. *Ibid* 166.
11. *Ibid* 175-76.
12. *Ibid* 184.
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One Day It Will Make You Sing

by Stewart Lawler

I needed to get up from my Sunday morning coffee and crossword and start on the review about a new magazine, *Art & Understanding: The International Magazine of Literature and Art About AIDS*, when a program on National Public Radio caught my attention. What really caught my attention out of the murmur was a voice and a story. Stories always get my attention. This story came from an oral history project in an old folks' home in Rochester, New York. As I listened to the voices and stories of the elderly women sharing their lives, the voice that especially caught my attention was that of an African-American woman who came of age in Mississippi during the civil rights era of the 1960s. She began by proudly telling the other women in the group about her "Certificate in Negro History." The collector of the stories didn't expect to see or find much in this "certificate." He was wrong. This woman, Sarah McClellan, told about her life in Mississippi. She told of the hunger and poverty in the rural South that she had always known and that the young civil rights workers discovered as they poured in from college campuses all over the United States. Of all the "kids" who came down, one "nice girl from Chicago" taught them the "Negro history" they "should already have been

taught." Sarah went on to tell about other events and people. In one local farmer's back field, two freedom fighters' bodies were found rotting under an old wagon. The farmer swore, Sarah said, "he thought it was an old rotted horse." Even though her story was related by the man who collected the histories, I could hear Sarah's voice as clearly as a chickadee's song. I especially remember that and two other things she said. The day Sarah hugged and kissed her friend, "the nice girl from Chicago," good-bye, she told her, "A person's a person, and out of one blood God created all nations." Later, the white postmaster's wife, who from the beginning looked at those "kids" with a distrust bordering on hatred, asked Sarah in her usual snide voice, "Sarah, where is that girl from Chicago?" Sarah couldn't answer. Sarah earned her "Certificate in Negro History" the hard way. She told the group in the Rochester old folks' home, "Sometimes you hear things that make you silent, but one day it will make you sing." Sarah McClellan, formerly from

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Mississippi but now living in Rochester, New York, said this. She talked to me. I heard her. I got up to write my review about *Art & Understanding: The International Magazine of Literature and Art About AIDS*, launched in the fall of 1991.

"We have started to sing," says David Waggoner in the "Editor's Letter" in the second issue (Winter 1992). "By publishing work about literature and art, we will allow future generations a chance to experience the imaginations of so many fine artists and writers. We need to bear witness to this complex and compromising human problem. Out of every human catastrophe comes great art. . . . To overcome difficulty is to endure. To 'write out' of tragic circumstance is a truly poetic consequence of AIDS." "Bearing witness" is a great concept. It is a double load: one must both "see" and "tell"—a sacred responsibility. *Art & Understanding* seeks to bear this double responsibility of seeing and telling.

Seeing is no easy task. It has little to do with 20/20 vision. *Oedipus Rex* taught us that a long time ago. The feeble old blind man, led in by a boy, is the Seer. Oedipus is the real "blind" man, and as always, there will be terrible consequences of his blindness brought on himself, by himself. None so blind as those who will not see. In preparing for a course on African-American fiction, I ran across a phrase that said, not to know the culture is not to know the people. Not to see "culture"—when it is there—is not to see "people" at all. Whoa! We should know from the past what happens when people are denied their "humanity." "In Germany in the 1930s and 1940s Jews were seen as "vermin," "bacilli" and "rats." They were, with clinical logic, "exterminated." One hundred years earlier in this country, native Americans were seen as "godless savages," "brutes" and "animals." They were, consequently, "slaughtered" and "butchered." Stephen Jay Gould tells of early Boer settlers in South Africa on a safari killing, dressing out, cooking and eating a "Hottentot." "Ooh! How could they kill another human being, much less eat his flesh?" Of course, they didn't: they killed a "wild bush beast." Seeing is important—vital.

What can make us see when we are so myopic? Perhaps one answer lies in culture. Only when we see culture can we see people. Of course this should be reversed, but I think the culture end is the most accessible pathway to seeing. By seeing culture we start to see "people," and as we see "people" more clearly and accurately, we see them as whole people, not as reduced cardboard "things." The clarity is in the details. The people and culture are in the stories: the voices of real people. And, of course, when we see people clearly, they start to look a lot

like us. It might dawn on us to treat them as we would be treated.

This is, I think, the aim of *Art & Understanding*: to make us see "people," to see them clearly and wholly, to recognize ourselves in them and act accordingly. *Art & Understanding* does this through culture: stories, poems, art, essays and interviews. A parallel benefit is to have a record of great artists who have not only been "invisible" as "people" and "culture," but also are now rapidly disappearing from society and life itself.

Seeing is no easy task. It has little to do with 20/20 vision.

When we talk without seeing clearly, we inevitably say dumb things and make fools of ourselves. Ideas and opinions about AIDS, when devoid of concrete experience and personal knowledge, are often ignorant. There are consequences to this ignorance. Disembodied ideas are reductions and illusions. Ideas can never be severed from their human context without a sense of butchery. To talk about and see "AIDS people" is a frightening illusion. There are only people—lots of different individuals—who, among many other concerns in their lives, have the AIDS virus. Their lives have larger contexts. We must not mistake the part for the whole. *Art & Understanding* tries to remedy this reductive, distorted, disembodied, myopic view.

Art & Understanding points out what should be obvious, that AIDS is not one thing affecting one small group of people. It is a spectrum of things affecting a spectrum of people. AIDS touches a whole network of people: brothers, sisters, friends, lovers, uncles, mothers and fathers. There are people who work as volunteers or professionals in AIDS hospices. There are those who visit and send cards, as well as those who live or find treatment there. Care and love know no limits of age, gender, ethnic background or economic class. In "Three Hours in an AIDS Hospice" (Fall 1991), Janet Howey introduces us to a volunteer who tells us about those who are cared for. Henry with his stomach bloated to the size of a "7-month pregnancy," has put a "Do Not Disturb" sign on his door for three weeks now. Sherry has had her dosage of anti-depressants cut back, enabling her to smoke a cigarette, watch *The Young and the Restless* on TV and worry about who is looking after her 4-year-old daughter. Later, "she will sleep with her 26-year-old arms wrapped around her teddy bear." Frank, boney and down under a hundred pounds, refuses to complain. He "enthusiastically" compliments the volunteer on the

"beautiful" purple flowers she brought. Juan is "asleep, or deeply depressed," and doesn't see his flowers being placed on the mantle beside photos of his daughter and granddaughter. Harold, "having a good day," is working on his finances on his computer. John and Bill share a room. John sometimes uses a cane to go to the kitchen for cheesecake. Bill can't. David has shared a sandwich, a smoke and a walk outside with his lover who has visited him,

*When we see people clearly
they start to look a lot like
us.*

but now David is in a dark room because light hurts his eyes. Ted is stoned: the marijuana is prescribed for pain and nausea. He is angry because he hurts and is vomiting. Thirty-year-old Jerome, who has "spit in AIDS' eye," now says he "feels like a weak old man." Brad "lies in bed, silent, his eyes wide open." After the volunteer's day is over, she leaves the hospice, but finds she suddenly sees more keenly. All the things around her appear sharper. Her eyes and heart and brain are connected. Her vision is enlivened and penetrating. As she rides the train home, her eyes are wide open.

A woman boards, wet and wind blown, and stands next to my seat. I notice her shiny hair, ruddy skin, taut muscles, clear eyes. She is lost in serious thought. Work or school, maybe. Her family or love life, the world's sorrows, who knows? Watching her, I see myself. I want to reach out and touch her strong, smooth arm, to wonder at it, to marvel at her health, and mine. If we remember, we can still smell the wind and rain, feel them tease and play with us. I can barely sit still on the train. My cells want to sing every moment in celebration.

There are other webs of life. In "What World?" by Virginia Pye (Fall 1991), the death of a friend, Don, touches off connected worlds of memory. New York and Ohio and California are connected. Families and generations are remembered. Extended families are recollected: Keith, Carolyn, Richard, Rachel and June. Fears, love, relationships, break-ups, careers, seasons, forgetting, forgiving and remembering are all made into story.

Many others are remembered formally in *Art & Understanding* (Fall 1991). "Medieval Lullabies" by Linda Boulette is 'For Joey.' Sam Ambler's "Fritz" is 'For Fritz Kirk, 1944-1991.' "Pandora Then Heard a Small Voice" by Mark O'Donnell is subtitled 'A

Friend Has Been Diagnosed with AIDS.' In the same issue "The Purpose of Astronomy," written by Raymond Luczak, is 'For Sam Edwards'; David Bergman's "The Care and Treatment of Pain" is 'In memory of Allen Barnett' (a photo of Allen accompanies the poem); "Brady Street, San Francisco" by Michael Lassell is 'For Roberto Munoz.' Leo Luke Marcello's "The Last Visit" (July/August 1992) bears the inscription, 'Elegy for the friend who confronting another AIDS death said, "Happiness is the only option I have left."' As in much African and African-American culture, immortality is gained by remaining alive in the memory, lives and actions of others. Their spirits are in us, nourishing us, shaping our deeds, songs, stories and art.

Certainly the importance of memory, art, family, transformation and connection are seen in the National AIDS Quilt Project and in the story "Threads" by Jameson Currier (Spring 1992).

Behind him, I am suddenly astounded by the sight of a woman pushing an empty stroller. Beside her a man carries a baby, less than six months old, in his arms. On the other side of the panel an elderly woman with a cane touches the frame of her eyeglasses and leans to read a name. This is something that has hit us all.

Behind each name is the story of a life, someone who struggled with this disease and lost. Behind each panel there are many stories: Who made it? Who helped? Why this color, this fabric? What does the design remember or represent? Who cried when it was finished? Who recognizes the name as they walk by? And each of us brings our own stories to the quilt, our views, opinions, knowledge and experiences with this disease. And we are united, sewn together as it were, by our thoughts of families, lovers, friends, and co-workers; some dead, some sick, some worried. This is our Gettysburg, our Vietnam Wall, our Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Yet those wars are over, this one continues. All of us frightened this could be happening to us next. The quilt grows larger every day.

Along with the Quilt Project there is the *AIDS Quilt Songbook* project. The *Songbook* is reviewed in the July/August 1992 issue, and there is an interview with William Parker, the originator, in Spring 1992.

Art & Understanding won't let us see AIDS from an outside or disconnected point of view, though it often shows us varying perspectives. Cathleen E. Jenkins remembers her brother in a series of "last times," realizing that "there won't be another last

time" (July/August 1992). A young teenager visiting her gay brother is taken to a national AIDS march and ironically comments, "there sure are a lot of you people," in a story of the same name (Spring 1992). "In Hospital" by Craig A. Reynolds (July/August 1992) gives us "The faintly septic odor of hospital disinfectant," as well as the muffled PA system, the robes and masks, "the steaming but odorless entrees" and "HAZMAT-orange canisters." And in "Not at Home" by D. Alexander Holiday (July/August 1992) we hear the voice say,

Glad you finally decided
to stop by.
Sorry, for this mess
on the stoop.
I'm not at home.

I haven't been here
for several days
maybe even several weeks.
I'm on a
sort of extended vacation.

No, the truth is
I'm off dying,
somewhere remote and quiet
from the virus.
Don't forward my mail.

In "Let Me Explain" by Leslea Newman (January/February 1993), we hear with absolute clarity the mother's voice speaking to her son's lover. Her son has just died. We hear her anguish, her love, her recollections, her jealousy as she tries to explain the unexplainable.

Of course I should have known he wasn't fine, Ray. I should have jumped on a plane that very day, that very minute, but, Ray you don't understand, you can't possibly know what it was like for me. I wanted to believe he was fine. I needed to believe it. I'd only had a year to digest the fact that I'd never dance at my son's wedding. I'd never bump hips with my daughter-in-law in the kitchen over pots and pans. . . . I couldn't take any more bad news. I'm sure you think I was being selfish, Ray, but I'm only human after all. . . . Who wouldn't want to believe those two magic words, "I'm fine"? . . . I believed him every Sunday morning, "I'm fine, Ma, really. I'm fine."

At the end of the letter she says,

I hope this quilt you're making helps you in some way, I hope it makes you feel better somehow. Thank you for writing to me, and inviting me to be a part of it, but Ray, nothing in this entire world could possibly comfort

me now. My life is over. And that's why I'm contributing to Stevie's quilt panel what you'll find inside this box: the two jagged pieces of my bruised and broken heart.

Accompanying this story is a series of photographs by Scott W. Powell. In these "Self-Portraits" a young man first develops a small black spot; the spot grows; the whole picture becomes black and then fades to grey, then to white.

Art and Understanding *hopes we will see that no suffering is external or separate.*

These pieces both force us, and let us, see the unseen. We also learn to see the beautiful within the ugly. In "Kaposi's Sarcoma in White Male Adult, Age 29" by Richard Davis (September/October 1992), a man searches his body each night for two years for signs of sarcoma. He checks his ankles and feet first, "lesions usually appear on the extremities." He frets over a "rash" at his collarbone. He remembers "the scarlet carbuncles of youth." He thinks "This dot designs death for me/uncontrollable entropy." Is this the normal stuff of poetry? Is this what we should sing about? Yes. This poem, like all art, discovers and reveals; it refigures reality; it transforms. "The splotches began to form/a necklace/across my chest/red like rubies, though dull/as bloodstone." He sees the spots "individually beautiful . . . like drops of thick red wine/or the dark purple centers of pansies." His lover adds three hickeys to the necklace. The poet closes with the emblematic comment, "Maybe some trained observer/an artist/will look upon me in death/and see me covered with roses/thousands of petals of roses." There is a sense where art discovers and reveals all human truths as beautiful.

Even among the hidden are those even more invisible. In "Last Date" by V. Hunt (September/October 1992) we meet a hairdresser for a funeral home. He finds he is to do the friend from his adolescence. They had run away together from a small southern rural town to Atlanta many years earlier. They were lovers as well as friends but had grown apart. Impressions, memories and feelings roll in. He frets over his task, decides and begins.

I was still undecided about what to do with his hair. It was long enough to put another curl in it. And since I'd been thinking back on how good he'd looked when I gave him that

first one, I started to do it again. But I thought it might look funny on him now with him looking so old and wrinkled. That little cleansided fade he'd been wearing was cute, but since his hair was so long, I hated to cut it all off. Finally, I decided on finger waves. Done right, they can make a wino look pretty. Of course, they take forever to put in. But I had a lot of things I wanted to tell him anyway.

*"A person's a person, and out
of one blood God created all
nations."*

Richard Morrison, reviewing Thom Gunn's "The Man with Night Sweats" (September/October 1992), says, "These poems certainly do speak for the person with AIDS, but they are, in a broader sense, the voice of the disenfranchised: the unemployed, the homeless, the hungry, the otherwise marginalized underclasses of American society." He then quotes from Gunn's poem, "The Beautician."

She did find in it some thin
satisfaction
That she could use her tenderness as
skill
To make her poor dead friend's hair
beautiful
—As if she shaped an epitaph by
her action,
She thought—being a beautician
after all.

Another hidden and invisible human story is "Your Mother from Cleveland" by Bil Wright (September/October 1992). A man goes to the visitation of his dead neighbor, a professional transvestite, whose stage name was Your Mother from Cleveland.

I had a recurring vision of Your Mother from Cleveland in an abominable platinum page-boy I'd seen him in ("This look is Your Mother's Devastatingly Dark Doris Day," he'd drawl) and I wondered if he might have stipulated somewhere that he be laid out in it.

The following Saturday morning I took a cross-town bus that let me off about a half-block from Grappler's. Grappler's had the pulse-quickening distinction of preparing more gay men for burial in the last ten years than any other funeral home in Manhattan.

While at Grappler's he sees "a rather elfin looking man of maybe sixty or older even, [who] stood very unsteadily and began a kind of distended alcoholic ramble in a tone loud enough to quiet the others."

"I'm a Survivor," he declared. "I seen a time when they used ta treat us worse than anybody. Worse than the coloreds. Worse than anybody."

My stomach tightened. I suddenly resented being there. I instinctively observed that Your Mother and I were the only two Black people in the room.

"They used ta beat us as soon as look at us. Throw bottles and garbage. They wouldn't leave us to ourselves. Not anywhere in this city. Till that night. I was there, God Bless Me! I was there when we made history for ourselves!"

Back at his apartment the narrator takes a playbill from downstairs and tapes it to the door of his refrigerator.

I'd almost forgotten the small, xeroxed photograph of Your Mother under the details of the memorial. He was wearing the Doris Day wig. And a long, shiny number that I was sure was gilded with sequins. In his own words, Your Mother was doing what Your Mother did better than anybody: Festival of Lights. Carnival in Rio. Aida's Fourth Act Finale. But his eyes, like mascara'd bullets, told me Your Mother from Cleveland was probably more furious than I had ever dared to be. And it had nothing at all to do with a canceled show at the Plucked Pigeon in Coney Island.

Seeing and telling; feeling with and feeling for.

Not all of *Art & Understanding* is completely serious. It shows us that humor, like art, transforms as a healing medicine. The unbearable becomes enlivening. "Testing, Testing" by Kerry Grippe (Winter 1992) reveals this.

Check the kidney, heart and lung,
Breathe in, breathe out, show your tongue.
Red cells, white cells, platelet counts,
Are they in the right amounts?

Test the mouth and nose and ears,
(Don't you want to test my tears?)
IV, GI, EKG,
(Whatever do you mean to me?)

Bitter pills and nasty liquor.
"Are you better?" "No, I'm sicker."

RESULTS

If the tests are negative,
That means for you it's positive
And if the tests are positive,
That means for you it's negative.

(But we're not positive.)

In a humorous essay complete with cartoons called "Waiting for the End of the World," David Feinberg talks about "AIDS Time" (January/February 1993). Feinberg says that he no longer worries about reading Proust or *The Divine Comedy*. He tells any of us with AIDS to buy on credit and forget suicide because the note takes so long to write. He says AIDS time has given him incredible energy, purpose and direction in his habitually lackadaisical life, and he wishes he had tested positive when he was ten, so he could have gotten "charged up to work."

Art & Understanding has developed many features during its first two years. The magazine contains art, and a lot of it: photographs, drawings, and pictures of sculpture and performances. It regularly includes book, film, music and theater reviews, all on current AIDS-related topics, projects and information. There are interviews too. Patrick Moore talks about the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS. There is an in-depth interview with Diamanda Galas on her music, performance art, AIDS activism and ideas.

Though originating from Albany, New York, *Art & Understanding* consciously and successfully gathers material from all over the United States. Be-

sides working on the home front, *Art & Understanding* fulfills its mission by making contact with artists all over the world. It includes contributors from England, the Middle East, North Africa, Spain, Cyprus, France and Italy.

Art & Understanding forces us to see and lets us see. What it hopes we will see is that no human suffering is external or separate. There is no "them" against "us." If one of us suffers, all of us do. "They" don't have "it," we all have it. Art touches all of us. Diamanda Galas tells of seeing at a march "a very old couple, a husband and wife, each wearing a sweatshirt with a silkscreened photo of their son." What a hard thing this must be, physically, emotionally, culturally, philosophically and morally. And Galas sees it as beautiful—a holy family.

This seeing thing is not easy—this escape from ignore-ance. We need to see well, clearly and wholly, in order to understand and act well for our common weal—our health and our wholeness. This is to bear witness.

In the end what is the difference between those who have AIDS and those who do not? Less than you think—an illusion. As Sarah McClellan told us in her song, "A person's a person, and out of one blood God created all nations."

[*Art & Understanding: The International Magazine of Literature and Art About AIDS*, 25 Monroe Street, Suite 205, Albany, New York 12210.]