



A Closer Walk

A Film by Robert Bilheimer

Letters from the World of AIDS ***Letter 8***

November 18, 2001
New Delhi, India
By Robert Bilheimer

Background to this project

Who among us, I wonder, especially in the rich world, will not stand in judgment for the needless death of Lucky and her millions of brothers and sisters around the world?

Loved Ones,

The last time I wrote was six months ago from Fisherman's Cove in India. Here I am again in India -- for the third time in twelve months -- now in New Delhi. It's November 14th, the day after Diwali, a major Indian holiday that celebrates the onset of winter. Diwali, the Festival of Lights, is kind of a floating holiday: Each year, it happens sometime in October or November. I'm still not sure why the holiday changes from year to year, but it's a major observance, like Christmas. There's a big controversy in India right now about the smog and carbon dioxide pollution caused by the explosion of millions of firecrackers and small fireworks on Diwali Day, and I can see why. Looking out my hotel window here in Delhi, there's a 4 p.m. miasma so thick that the sky seems of another world: an eerie metallic gray urging to lavender as the sun festers, burns, and finally sinks below an invisible horizon. This is probably the way the whole world will look if it's ever overcome by pollution, which is not hard to believe here in Delhi, one of the world's most polluted cities. My view is particularly strange because the window of my hotel room looks out on a golf course bordered by huge bougainvillea, alistania, and agaridict trees that give the feeling of a jungle. A couple of miles beyond these trees rises the Delhi skyline. Today, only the trees are visible, so it's a bit like having a window on a world that doesn't really exist, or is only partially revealed.

I've come to India this third time for one purpose: to interview the Dalai Lama on the subject of global AIDS and the related issues of ethical and moral responsibility in the new millennium -- the first interview His Holiness has given on AIDS and its implications. And I am pleased to report that -- yes! -- this morning, almost exactly a year after I first asked my friend Rajiv Mehrotra if His Holiness might consider such an interview, I had a private 45-minute audience during which we spoke precisely of these things.

The interview with His Holiness was special for many different reasons, which I will share as best I can. But six months have elapsed between my last journal letter and now, and much has happened: organizational editing; never-ending fundraising; debate about how much more we need to do, and where we need to go in order to finish; shoots here in the U.S. and abroad.

One of the things that emerged during this time was the decision to do interviews with a few highly prominent and qualified individuals whose "name recognition" might broaden the film's interest and appeal for the general audience we are trying to reach. Thus, last June, for instance, I had an excellent interview with Bono, the lead singer of the Irish rock band U2, who has campaigned hard for developing world debt relief and now AIDS; who understands perfectly the need to "get into the shopping malls



A Closer Walk Director, Robert Bilheimer with Bono following their interview in Washington, DC June 15, 2001

with these issues any way we can"; and has a true Irish poet's sense of history and drama. "We will be judged by God for this," he said at one point.

Thinking about the Bono interview just before I came to Delhi, I was looking at some footage we shot in Uganda a year or so ago, and came across a sequence in which Peter Mugenyi, a wonderful doctor who runs the Joint Center for Clinical Research in Kampala, introduced us to Lucky, a two-year-old girl who died of AIDS shortly after we filmed Peter's examination of her. It was late in the afternoon, and golden sunlight poured through the window above her bed, casting an eerie, unforgettable beauty on the sad, sad scene.

"Her bedclothes weigh more than she does," Peter said, as he gently disrobed the child to reveal a skeletal body that was the frailest thing I have ever seen. "She has nothing left." Indeed, Lucky barely had the strength to cry out against the pain she was feeling, and as she gazed at Peter, her eyes said, "*What has happened to me?*" It was as though what little life she had left was distilled in those eyes, and they were like independent, frightened beings, speaking without words.

Peter, who has seen more than his share of AIDS horrors, was visibly shaken.

"It's too late with this one," he muttered. "So sad. So sad." As he carefully laid Lucky's immaculate and beautifully embroidered blankets back on her wasted body, all the while comforting her mother (now also no longer living)

who sat by Lucky's bedside, I murmured, "*And there are thousands like Lucky here in Uganda alone, aren't there, Peter?*" His body stiffened and he looked me in the eye, his own wet with tears. "*Thousands. And thousands. And thousands.*"

Who among us, I wonder, especially in the rich world, will not stand in judgment for the needless death of Lucky and her millions of brothers and sisters around the world?

Not long after the interview with Bono, I was honored to interview Kofi Annan in his offices at the United Nations in New York. Secretary General Annan is a man of immense dignity and deep compassion. His commitment to ridding the world of AIDS moved me deeply. He fears and understands the tentacles of the disease.



A Closer Walk Director, Robert Bilheimer with Secretary General Kofi Annan during their interview in New York City, August 3, 2001

I remember asking him towards the end of the interview if our response to the AIDS epidemic might in some way prove to be the measure of our spiritual and moral health as individuals, communities, and nations. Halfway through the question it was clear he wanted to answer right away. The gist of what he said is that we can talk all we want about commitment, compassion, living in a global society, inter-dependence, etc. "But," he asserted, "these are all hollow, meaningless statements

unless we actually do something." In the end, he said, it boils down to a simple question: "What kind of people *are* we?"

I sensed his deep humanity and also his vulnerability. He knows, and has said, that to be effective, we need billions of dollars a year for many years. That's the bottom line. But the other bottom line is that we are far from achieving that goal, and barring a sea-change in our attitudes and actions, individually and institutionally, there will be more and more Luckys, taken from the world before their time.

I remember Renee Sabatier* in *AIDS in the World* saying that the world is divided between those who *know* and those who do not, and that those who know run the risk of becoming AIDS voyeurs, standing around watching other people die. That was seven or so years ago, and *before* millions upon millions of deaths. We have made a lot of progress since. A sea-change may indeed be underway, and if it is, we have Kofi Annan in part to thank for it. But he needs our help.

I interviewed the Secretary General in August. A few weeks later, "September 11th" occurred.

Tragedy, of course, is absolute. As W.B. Yeats -- another Irish poet -- wrote, "though all the drop scenes drop at once / upon a hundred thousand stages, it cannot grow by an inch or ounce." As a human being, as an American, as one born in New York City, I mourn the loss of innocent life; the suffering this event has caused my country and its people; and the mutilation of the city of

my birth. And I despise the terrorists' cynical appropriation of one of the world's great religions to justify their stupidity and fanaticism. "Do not veil the truth with falsehood, nor conceal the truth knowingly," says the Koran. Their judgment day, too, awaits.

But I confess that I find myself longing at this point for a sense of balance and perspective. On September 11th, 3,000 innocent people died in an attack by cowards, and two big buildings in the world's greatest city collapsed. That same day, some 8,000 innocent people died of AIDS in every corner of the planet, further contributing to the actual or impending collapse of entire communities, regions, social infrastructures, even nations. And the day after September 11th, another 8,000 people died, and the day after that, and the day after that. Where are the billions of dollars, and expressions of global outrage, at the terror and violence inflicted on these innocent children, women, and men?

What does the September 11th outpouring tell us about the way we value life? Is the life of a courageous firefighter or innocent stockbroker somehow more valuable than the life of an innocent child in KwaZulu Natal or Tamil Nadu who has been born with AIDS because that child's mother wasn't given nevirapine?

Instead of the innocent and terrified passengers who perished on the three hijacked jets on September 11th, imagine all the seats in those three planes occupied by a child under the age of five. Then imagine those three planes crashing and burning every day, day after day, killing all on board. That's the toll AIDS takes on the childhood population of our planet, with no end in sight. Where is our sense of proportion in all this? Where is the real terror? What are the real challenges? What is our true responsibility?

It was with these thoughts in mind that I awaited the Dalai Lama in a hotel suite just outside the Delhi airport at ten o'clock this morning. We have interviewed -- or done profiles of -- some 75 individuals now, across the broad spectrum of the global AIDS experience. Orphans, people with AIDS, doctors, nurses, social workers, heads of state, people in rich countries living healthy lives with HIV, activists, judges, preachers, public health workers... it's a rich tapestry. And we have prepared for each of these interviews, I like to believe, with equal care and respect. Indeed, the more humble or helpless a subject, the more time we have been inclined to devote to that man, woman, or child precisely because we want to make the point that no human being is intrinsically more special or deserving of attention than any other.

May I confess, however, that this morning I could not help but be just a tad more, shall we say, on my toes, and perhaps just a tad more nervous, than usual, as my Indian film crew -- Naresh Bedi and his two sons -- along with my friend Rajiv Mehrotra of His Holiness' Foundation for Universal Responsibility, several monks, and a phalanx of security guards, awaited the Dalai Lama's entrance. This was an incredibly important moment, I felt, for the project, because His Holiness' participation underscored our essential goal for the film: to raise fundamental questions about our responsibilities to one another as fellow human beings in a global society. Though raised in a Christian tradition, I have read and admired Buddhist teachings for years, and His Holiness' increasing focus on this question of responsibility, especially in his beautiful book *Ethics for the New Millennium*, convinced me early on that if ever there was to be a creative and substantive "coup" for the project, this would be one of them. (It did not help relax me much, as we waited, that friends around the world had been telling me for weeks that not

only was this 45-minute private audience a rare thing indeed, but that it would also be a "life-altering experience." Thanks a lot!)

All of this was dispelled when the Dalai Lama entered the room, holding out both hands to me in a warm greeting, laughing, shaking hands with the crew, teasing Rajiv, cracking jokes. The simple but great lesson that can be learned from His Holiness right away lies in His presence, which is stripped of all pretense and posturing, and tells you right away that you are face-to-face with a profoundly *good* human being, pure and simple. This is inspiring in and of itself, and it is something you feel immediately, but not in a way that is overwhelming or intimidating. To the contrary, He makes you feel more like a human being too, so that when, after the greetings, we sat down to begin the interview, all my anxieties just fell away, and it was possible to converse with Him simply as one person to another.



A Closer Walk Director, Robert Bilheimer presenting His Holiness The Dalai Lama with Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man* following their interview in New Delhi, November 15, 2001

Three main themes emerged from our conversation that I believe we will be able to fold into the tapestry of *A Closer Walk*.

- The importance of developing a sense of universal responsibility that helps us become sensitive to *all* others -- not just those closest to us. Certain things, obviously -- AIDS in far-away African countries, wrenching poverty in India, famine, wars -- are beyond the immediate scope of the single individual. But what is not beyond our scope is a re-orienting of our hearts and minds away from ourselves and towards others, so that when opportunities arise to be compassionate towards others, we seize upon them.
- The importance of a sense of duty. As individuals, or as a society of individuals, we must avoid the urge to shut away those who are diseased or marginalized, because to do so, He said, is to "heap suffering upon suffering." People with AIDS have the same human right to health and happiness as we do, and just as we would look to others in our time of need, so too must we make sure that those who suffer from disease and marginalization *never feel helpless or unprotected*.
- Developing a sense of justice for all people requires an awareness of injustice, He said, which in turn requires us to understand the danger of silence. The suffering caused by AIDS requires us to speak out, even though it may not be comfortable to do so. And we have a special obligation when we see others, especially governments or institutions, who deny or avoid obvious remedies by claiming that such remedies are "our business." The happiness of the world is everybody's business, and the world will never be truly happy unless we are all engaged in avoiding self-centeredness.

The Dalai Lama is an avid and astute scholar of other religions, and He has a particular fondness for the teachings of Jesus. For the last question in our interview, I wondered what Jesus, if He were walking the earth today, would

think of our world, 2,000 years after He went to the Cross?

For a moment His Holiness stared out the window in reflection. Then He said that He thought Jesus would be impressed by the progress we have made in some areas, including technological and artistic achievement, an emerging concern for the environment, and finding common ground among the religions.

Then He paused, and an extraordinary glitter came into His eyes that I will never forget. He leaned forward as though letting me in on a secret, raised his eyebrows, and said, "*But truly, perhaps mostly, I think He would be scolding us!*"

And then the Dalai Lama broke into laughter, as though he had said the best and most original thing ever, and he laughed and laughed, the gay and sparkling laughter of the enlightened, and the truly wise.

With love from New Delhi,

Robert

* **Editor's Note:** Dr. Renee Sabatier, is a public health official with the Canadian Public Health Association. *AIDS in the World*, and *AIDS in the World II*, edited by Jonathan Mann and Daniel Tarantola, were the first definitive books about the global AIDS epidemic, and its relationship to underlying social causes. Dr. Sabatier was a contributor to *AIDS in the World*. [Return to story.](#)

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