

"Let's Develop!"

Talk given by Betsi Pendry, founder and director of the Living Together Project, on World AIDS Day, Robben Island, 2002

Good Morning. It is an enormous privilege and honor to be here with you. Thank you so much for joining us today. I'm looking forward to what we can create together. In the spirit of the day, of having hard conversations about HIV/AIDS and about all of us being able to grow and stretch together, I have to start by saying that talking in front of large groups of people makes me very uncomfortable. It doesn't feel natural for me to do this. And the fact that it is unnatural is its value, as all of need to do things that are new and uncomfortable for us, to do things that seem unnatural to us. This is how we will grow. So, as I am talking to you, and I'm uncomfortable, I invite you to also do things today that seem unnatural to you and make you uncomfortable. There is a special kind of freedom in being able to explore and do new things, to be able to babble as a child when we are adults. There is freedom in being able to be bad at something, as we are on our way to becoming someone new. I learned this in my first art classes here, that it was really a joy to be bad at trying to do art, to be free to not be an expert, to not have to know something or be good at it. I could be a beginner. I hope that we can approach today in this way-- that we are on our way somewhere, that we don't have to "know things" or be experts, we can stumble and fall, as we are developing and that we don't know where we'll end up. And that can make us uncomfortable at times.

Since I was a teenager South Africa has inspired, moved and touched me. Now that I am here, it does even more so. Robben Island itself carries the voices of those who have been most hurt and impacted upon by unfair social systems as well as the voices of those who have triumphed over them. It speaks to some of our greatest mistakes as well as some of our greatest achievements. It is therefore a very good place to start a conversation about HIV/AIDS, another thing which speaks of both our weaknesses and our strengths. We all know about the sadness, the pain, the poverty and injustices that stem from HIV/AIDS, we see this in our families and communities as well as in the media everyday. HIV/AIDS is a virus; some of us have it. There is also another virus, and that is the social virus of under-development, of fear of others or "outsiders", stigma and indifference. And like the HIV virus, this too will spread if there is not something done to challenge it. In response to each of these viruses, a number of positive things have been done however, some of them you see around us, done by people who have never done "art" before. This is

what I hope we can highlight today, some of the positive and creative ways that communities are responding to the epidemic of HIV/AIDS.

Robben Island is about journeys. We have all been on one this morning. In talking with you this morning I want to share with you a bit of my own journey, one that has brought me here with you on Robben Island.

When I was barely 20 years old, my twin sister was killed in a car accident. The day after her death I went into her room and sat on her bed. At her bedside was a card, with a quote from a famous labor organizer, Mother Jones. The quote said “ We have to pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living.” I was taken aback by this card for a few reasons. One, I was at the very beginning of coming to terms with the fact that she had just died, and here was a message by her bed about how to respond to death and to life. I was also at the beginning of seeing that I had just become a new person, I was no longer a part of a twinship. I was the twin who had lost a twin; I was now “single”. I was not sure where this left me, but I knew that I felt very very alone. The second thing that took me aback was that my sister was not really a political person; it was me who had been politically active since our teens in the late 60’s and 70’s in the USA. Yet here it was, a quote from a political activist by her bed. As in life, she continued to surprise me. I realized that as close as we were, and as well as I thought that I knew her, she was challenging me, in her death, to see her, and myself, in new ways. Since then, for well over 20 years, I have been involved in “fighting for the living” as well as in challenging how we see ourselves and others, challenging the categories of identity, or “identity politics and psychology,” challenging the categories of “other” and “outsider,” who fits in and who doesn’t, who has the right to participate and who doesn’t.

In my pursuit of fighting for the living in the USA I trained as a social therapist at the East Side Institute for Social Therapy, where I am currently the Africa Associate, I was the director of the Center in Boston, worked for an anti-violence program for inner city youth called the All Stars Talent Show Network and I petitioned to get independent political candidates on the presidential ballot. Along the way I started working with drug addicted women. This is how HIV/AIDS came more into my life. These pursuits gave me quite an education in politics, psychology and in building community.

Social Therapy is not a traditional psychology, in Social Therapy we relate to people as changers rather than as objects of change. We understand people to be both the products of their environments and at the same time, the

creators of the environments, which in turn shape them. Social Therapy engages this dialectic-- we can only change and create change by changing our environments. It engages this by using performance as the engine of development.

In my training and practice I came to see that what would be most helpful to people would be for them, us, to learn how to create social environments that support our development, and that, in fact, building those very same environments was developmental. This was how we could get help with our emotional problems. Additionally, contrary to many models of personal growth which put people who are "similar" into the same groups, in Social Therapy I learned that for us to develop, we have to engage our differences and build with them, with people who are different than ourselves. I learned that searching for sameness and "a haven in a heartless world," being safe and separate, limits development. South Africans know this probably better than most.

In 1998, after work in Ecuador, Guatemala and Cuba on health and human rights projects, I came to South Africa. This is when I made my first visit to Robben Island.

My work has been to bring people together who are different from each other to create something new together. One phrase that is used a lot is "building bridges." In fact it was the theme of an international AIDS conference. While I think I understand the sentiment behind the phrase, I do not like it. In building bridges there are still different people on different sides of the road, or the river or whatever. There may be a connecting bridge but that does not mean people cross it or use it. We are still separate. I prefer "building something new together" with all the mess that we human beings have as people. In building something new we are the owners and creators of what we build, it is ours. We come together to build; we are not separate but co-creators. It is our activity that matters, not "our identity." This to me is what citizenship is, building new environments with each other. This is one of the reasons that art and performance are so important as a daily part of life, they teach us how to create and build with what we have.

On my first tour of Robben Island a few things struck me. First, the political prisoners had a commitment to the development of everyone, not only themselves and the other prisoners, but the prison guards as well. This floored me, that the prisoners, who were under the rule of the apartheid state, not only created learning environments for themselves, but for everyone, including their

jailers. To me this embodies the juncture of two things. We are defined both by society and by history, we are both our social roles, be that a mother, a teacher or a prisoner, and we have our historical roles, as the builders of the ongoing environments that we live in and will live in. We perform both of these roles simultaneously, though oftentimes we are stuck more in our social roles than in our historical roles. We can see this by many of the conflicts that emerge when we relate according to our social identity. In our historical roles these conflicts do not exist, as we are all the co-creators of our environments, we are in this together as creators and builders, as historical citizens. The prisoners were performing their historical role, as the leaders of the new democratic South Africa, at the same time as they were wearing the clothing of prisoners.

Another thing that stayed with me from my first visit to Robben Island and in further reading and conversations is the process that Mandela and others insisted upon for the transformation of the apartheid state, one of dialogue and engagement, even amongst enemies. There was the insistence that the development of the new South Africa had to include the old South Africa. There was an insistence that people come together as human beings and create their new environment, no matter how difficult or challenging. It is these things that have stayed with me, and when I was here again about six months ago with the Living Together Project workshop, I decided that I wanted to pursue having an event here for World AIDS Day, to explore the relationship between the history here and what we need to do in response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

As I have said, our environments determine a lot, if we were in a church or mosque we would speak about religion or God, if we were in New York City, or China or Cuba, we would speak about something else. We are on Robben Island, and this demands that we speak about revolution, as this is one of the things that Robben Island was the home to and has come to symbolize around the world, revolution South Africa style. And this requires hard conversations and the development of everyone. What was done here has to be done everywhere, especially around HIV/AIDS.

At the core of transforming social environments, and at the core of Social Therapy, is revolutionary activity. It is the day to day work of breaking free from the constraints of our social roles so that we can break into our historical roles, by performing, to be the creators of new environments.

There may or may not be a relationship between Revolution and revolutionary activity. Sadly, some of the successful revolutions of the 20th century have not

created new social development or new kinds of social relationships. While there may be successful changes in governments, changing our daily interactions, our roles as citizens, seems to be much harder. I want to turn our attention to this revolutionary activity as a critical ingredient in our collective response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. What do I mean by this?

History as taught us that nations can transform themselves, there are revolutionary moments and then there is the ongoing work of revolutionary activity, the ongoing work of building and rebuilding communities and nations. Cuba, Nicaragua and China have taught us a lot. They had to engage in some very serious struggles after their revolutions. Each rose to the occasion. In Cuba, thousands and thousands of people participated in a literacy campaign, and in ONE YEAR, Cuba conquered illiteracy. In China, there was the barefoot doctors campaign, in which thousands and thousands of doctors traveled the country to deliver health care to the millions and millions of Chinese who had never seen a doctor, and in Nicaragua, volunteers from around their country and the globe helped them with their agriculture, which enabled them to feed their people. These were volunteer efforts at nation building. Doing what had to be done as a nation to keep developing. I want to suggest the same type of revolutionary activity for South Africa. That every business, family, organization, church and mosque, union, government official, institution and community member, that every sector and the National Partnership Against AIDS, commit to a national community building effort. That, as of now, everyone not only sees themselves and others as volunteer community builders but that as of now everyone acts as a member of the National Volunteer AIDS and Development Corporation.

Wherever I am in South Africa people ask me what I am doing here. Many are surprised that a white American would want to be here. Everybody asks me about what I do on a daily basis and want to know how I like it here. Many of them think HIV doesn't affect them, until they realize that it already has, that their brother is a doctor who works in a hospital and sees deaths from AIDS every day, or their domestic worker, a mother and sister to others, has just died leaving two kids, or a co-worker has just died, or a school teacher or the taxi driver, or a grannie has just had to take in two more children. Many people say to me they have never met someone with HIV/AIDS. This is not possible; they just don't know that they know someone with HIV. And to a person, everyone says they wish there was something that they could do about HIV/AIDS in their country. There is.

If every person, every family, human resource manager, CBO, NGO, small business and all others were to give one hour a week for every person in their organization to develop, not only would a lot get done, not only would people be given skills, not only could kids be given an education, not only could food be grown and clinics be built, but people from different backgrounds and walks of life would come together to build something positive together. They would be engaged in creating the new citizenship of South Africa, they would be coming together to build and that process would mean that everyone would develop.

The person who cuts my hair could train PWA's needing a job, the person who runs the store where I shop could give time to a young person needing support to read, the local club could cook food for the hungry, the athletic team could coach a younger team, there are a million ways to build community, we just need to do it. And thousands are already doing it, the people in this room are already doing it. My art teacher collects containers that she and a friend fill with food to distribute in Diepsloop. My housemate has just decided to leave his job as a land surveyor to work full time in poverty alleviation and HIV/AIDS. More than people "giving back" people want to "give forward."

Development is for everyone, it is not just for poor people, or HIV infected people, or uneducated people. Development, like democracy, is by and for everyone. The president of a bank needs to develop, the schoolteacher and professor need to, doctors and sisters need to, as well as everyone else. No society or person is prepared for HIV in his or her lives, no one. This means we all need to develop together. We could break free from our social roles as an American or as a shopkeeper, or as the gardener, or as HIV infected or not, or as Black, or white, or Colored, and I suggest that we do. Instead we could be the builders of communities and developmental environments.

HIV/AIDS grows in the cracks of under-development. So too with stigma. Imagine the difference if there were 30 million human relationship hours a week devoted to development. The cracks where HIV and stigma grow would be filled with something else, development not under-development. Imagine if the people that are the "targets" of programs were in fact seen as the builders of new environments, not fundamentally as sex workers, or as youth, or as truck drivers, or miners, etc. This new South Africa could develop even as HIV/AIDS makes this a daunting task. The new South Africa would be engaged in revolutionary activity, of creating positive social environments for everyone. And once again, South Africa could lead the world in how to develop in the face of adversity. This would go a long way to dealing with HIV/AIDS.

As I was thinking about this talk I was reminded of a quote from Pastor Martin Niemoller, a protestant minister In Nazi Germany. What he said then has been an important guide for me. It is as important today as it was when he wrote it. It is:

"First they came for the
Socialists and I did not speak out
Because I was not a socialist.

Then they came for the
trade unionists,
And I did not speak out
Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews
And I did not speak out
because I was not a Jew

And then came for me
And there was no one left
To speak out for me."

I am hoping that we can explore a new activity of citizenship, of building something new together in the time of HIV/AIDS, here today. I hope that we will create together and be awkward, that we will experience development through creativity, through performing hard conversations and through building together.