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# A CALL TO ARMS

*Activist MARY FISHER spoke at the 1992 Republican National Convention in Houston, Texas about AIDS. Her speech raised eyebrows, opened a space for broader policies to combat the AIDS crisis, and helped turn a loop of red ribbon into an icon of compassion, solidarity and action. Nineteen years later, Mary talks about red and what it means to her.*

Opposite: She's a Mother, a recent quilt by Mary Fisher

It's a magical color, red. Like all things truly magical, it can leave you breathless and speechless. It can come dressed in mystery to startle you, or seduce you, or make you wonder.

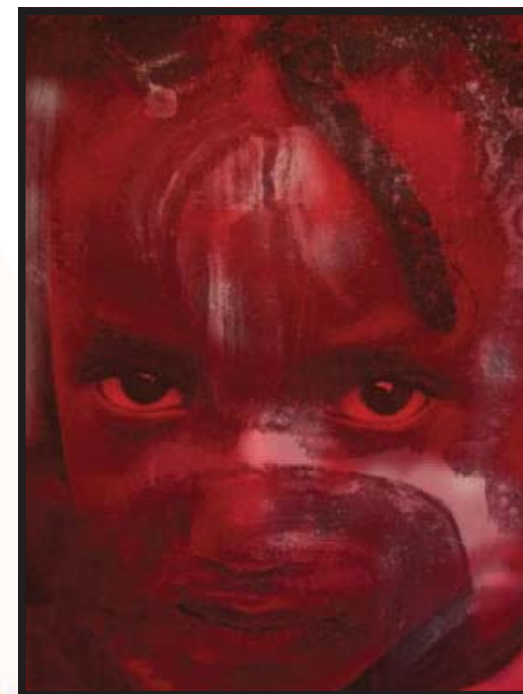
Perhaps red's power is nothing more than physics. Red is the color produced by the longest wavelengths of light visible to the human eye (hence, any longer wavelength is infrared, "below red"). Is this what teases the brain to see red as the color of out-of-bounds passion, undisciplined emotion? Is it, perhaps, merely biological?

For the Greeks, red symbolized super-human heroism. For the Romans, it was all about war. For the church, it's the crucifixion – or the Scarlet Letter of lust, sin, guilt and pain. It names a 2010 movie, a rock band, Bono's campaign against AIDS in Africa, and a recent play about Mark Rothko. When I was a child, the "red menace" was Communism adorned with the Soviet Union's red star; annually, the sirens in our school wailed terror and we dove under our desks hoping to survive the nuclear holocaust the "the Reds" had in store for us.

Since I first experimented with art, I've used reds. Like many others, I mix my own colors and watch my reds announce themselves in various, unnamed hues. I use reds lavishly but carefully. (I learned young, as a TV producer, that I could fix any guest's drab outfit with a red scarf or carnation; every politician knows that the "right" color for their tie is red.)

It can be a hard color to work with: a little red can go a long way. When I'm dyeing textures, for example, my near-perfect red disappears when wet fabrics morph into something I didn't intend before they've dried. When printing paper or textiles, the reds have a tendency to straggle off like children looking for blueberries. Getting a red just right, and holding it, is tough.

Some times when working with red, I think of it as bold, audacious, courageous. I see the noble Masai warrior striding across the plains of East Africa draped in his brilliant red cape. Or I may I see the red lollipop that's joyfully smeared across a four-year-old's face, or the red blood that's pooling on the floor of an ER – shocking contrasts, staggering differences, one color.



Thirty years ago, my fellow pilgrims on the road to AIDS were mostly stigmatized and shunned. They were judged immoral, told they were shameful. If they wasted and died, what else could they expect? Years of salt-drenched steak washed down by Bourbons didn't make the senator responsible for his heart attack, and decades of smoking still rendered the movie-star lung-cancer patient a "victim." But people with AIDS were guilty; they got what they deserved.

Somewhere in the darkness of those days a designer took a shank of ribbon, angled its corners, twisted it once, and attached it to his lapel with a pin. Before any other cause had grabbed the idea, the ribbon belonged to AIDS; and it was red. To wear it was a "coming out" statement. You put on the ribbon to announce that AIDS was a disease, not a moral failing, and that you cared. The bright red of the ribbon made it worth wearing, gave it potency, made it smack.

It all came together for me the night I spoke at the Republican Convention in 1992. My friends Bob Hattoy and Elizabeth Glaser, both now dead, had spoken at the Democratic Convention to a sea of 50,000 red ribbons bedecking every Democratic delegate. When I mounted the podium in Houston that steamy August night, the absence of red ribbons told me what I already knew: I was going to tell people I had AIDS, that I was going to leave my pre-school children orphans, and that many in the audience wanted only to know how I got it.

Twenty years have passed. I still have red in my life, and in my work. It is not always raucous or flamboyant, not always political or assertive. Sometimes it's merely lovely and that's enough.

Every morning dawn breaks over the valley outside my bedroom window and the red-rock cliffs of Sedona come to life with ancient, spiritual voices that whisper of hope and healing. In the evening, the western sun streaks back into the canyons, quietly bringing a burnt-red offering to call us to prayer. It's soft, embracing, powerful, comforting. It's magical.

It's red. And I am still here to see it at least in part because of the wave of action that red ribbon helped bring about.

*HIV-positive artist and activist Mary Fisher works from her studio in Sedona, AZ. Her handmade papers and photography are found in public and private collections; her work with textiles is more recent and receiving rave reviews. See [www.maryfisher.com](http://www.maryfisher.com) for more.*