

My Reiki Journey

By Bill Stevens

I am 88 years old. I have been practicing Reiki since 1991 and teaching Reiki since 2002. I have studied with seven different Reiki Masters. Four of these incredible teachers impacted my life profoundly, teaching me that Reiki was a spiritual path and healing was a side effect of my practice. These teachers were Kunzang Dechen Chodron (Reiki Jin Kei Do and Buddho-EnerSense), Frans Stiene (International House of Reiki, Usui Reiki Ryoho), Kathleen Prasad (creator of the Let Animals Lead® method), and Hyakuten Inamoto (Komyo ReikiDo). I do not know why I was guided to learn from such impactful teachers, but I was.

I recently became aware of a book written by Nicholas Pearson entitled *The Foundations of Reiki Ryoho: A Manual of Shoden and Okuden*. While reading his chapter on the history of Reiki, I realized that my life's journey almost coincided with this history. Usui Mikao died in 1926; my parents were married in 1927; I was born in 1933 in Boston, Massachusetts, the fourth of five children. My birth was twelve years after Usui began his 21-day retreat of fasting and meditation on Mount Kurama, where he received the gift of Reiki, dramatically changing his life and starting him on a journey that would change the lives of millions. Of course, it would take me over 50 years before I even heard of the word Reiki, but it was also a transformative journey for me.

At 17, I joined a Catholic religious Congregation of Brothers. These Brothers had taught me in high school, and after my training, I was to teach in their schools for 24 years. I then made a life-changing decision. I paid attention to an uneasy feeling in my life, left teaching, and in 1980, enrolled in an intensive year of training as a hospital chaplain. Interestingly, as I look back on it, this was the year Hawayo Takata died.

During this time, people with AIDS came into the hospital to die. A diagnosis of AIDS was a death sentence in those days. It was a profound challenge for me. I was scared and felt ill-prepared. I needed help. I turned to the leading

AIDS organization in New Jersey at the time, Hyacinth AIDS Foundation, to educate myself and become a volunteer. I also became a buddy to a person with AIDS. Now deceased, Leonce Chabernaude was a gay man from Texas with a drug addiction. I learned about his life and the pain of losing all your friends to the disease. I learned about enabling and being manipulated and the pain of addiction. Leonce was determined to become clean before he died, find a relationship, become the actor he always wanted to be, come out publicly as a person with AIDS, and fight the stigmatization while educating kids about the epidemic and how to be safe. He accomplished all of this.

He inspired me to do more. I left hospital ministry and formed a nonprofit organization, Chrysalis Ministry, to create a safe space for people to come together. We organized free four-day retreat programs for those struggling with AIDS. It was a safe environment for those living isolated lives, hiding from even family and friends with whom they could not share their secrets. These retreats changed people's lives.

I was drawn to study massage therapy as a way to bring comfort to the "untouchables," and I heard of a priest in San Francisco offering Reiki to the patients who came into his hospital. I had never heard of Reiki before. I searched for a teacher and found the only Master-level teacher, at the time, in New Jersey, Penny Gnesin. She taught me Usui Shiki Ryoho, which was in the Hawayo Takata lineage. During the next seven years, I used this initial Level I training for my outreach to AIDS patients, their families, and caregivers. I trusted what I had been taught. I continued to offer Reiki, although I experienced nothing myself. I noticed it was making a difference for others, which was all that mattered.

I went to organized AIDS clinics in hospitals. When the clients visited their doctor, they could receive a massage or Reiki session before or after their appointment. I also offered these modalities during support groups held at different venues. A person could leave the session and step in for a half-hour treatment. On one of these occasions, I gave Reiki to a man who had mental health issues and struggled with drug addiction. At the end of the session, he was in a pretty different state, and not because of any substance he had taken. He told me it was the most spiritual experience he had ever

had. He could not expand on that any further, but was visibly affected. Reiki did that—it brought people to a different place - a peaceful, quiet, deep place. Quite profound.

I visited AIDS patients in the hospital who were in their last days. I recall one particular person who was in pain when I visited, and I offered Reiki to him. At the conclusion, he told me that the pain had dissipated. I was as surprised as he. Later, whenever I walked into the room, he would say, "Here comes my pain medication." I often thought the nurses suspected I was sneaking something into the room to relieve his discomfort.

I went to Bailey House in Greenwich Village in New York, an AIDS residence housing some 30 people, and spent the day offering massage and Reiki. The responses to these sessions were rewarding. Unfortunately, the disease had made them "the lepers of society" - their bodies covered with purple blotches from the AIDS-related Kaposi's sarcoma, a type of cancer that affected people with severely weakened immune systems.

Towards the end of my AIDS ministry, I connected with Kunzang Dechen Chodron, who had devoted her life to the study of Buddhism after having left a promising career, family, home, and friends in Vermont to pursue this path. She had incorporated the teachings of Seiji Takamori into her life, - both the teachings of Reiki Jin Kei Do and the Buddho-EnerSense system of healing.

These teachings led me to deeper meditation practices and the Master's level training with one of her students, Gilbert Gallego. The ball now was in my court. My practice was the only issue. The deepening of my Reiki practice depended on the time I took for myself. It was gratifying to teach Reiki to those whose lives were beginning to be saved with the new HIV medications, which were slowly developing. The AIDS diagnosis began to change from a death sentence to a more manageable disease. And people were able to learn a healing modality to help them combat the adverse effects of these saving medications.

After 12 years of AIDS ministry, I had emergency open-heart surgery, which upended my life. I closed Chrysalis Ministry and took a sabbatical year. During this year I researched hospice and end-of-life ministry. I was drawn to begin an end-of-life counseling program taught by Frank Ostaseski at a Zen hospice in San Francisco. I entered this one-year training program and traveled to San Francisco each month to attend four consecutive days of teachings with doctors, social workers, volunteers, chaplains, and nurses who worked with the dying. For the rest of the month, we did our fieldwork where we lived. I did mine at the Visiting Nurse Association (VNA) hospice program in New Jersey.

Upon completing this training, I applied to the VNA to be a chaplain. Soon after I began, I also asked if I could include Reiki as part of my ministry. I was told I needed to pass it by the Board of Directors. They gave me a trial period after my presentation. I decided to teach Level I Reiki to a group of interested nurses, so they would know the possibilities of this modality. They began to make referrals. I also asked the Director to let me know the next time she was having a stressful day, and I would give her a session. It did not take long. We had our session, and she became a supporter.

The most consistent question put to me by family members was "What is Reiki," when it was mentioned as a choice for their loved one. I always struggled with an answer that would not turn off the questioner. So, when I had 30 seconds to respond to the inquiry on the phone, I would say, "Reiki is a spiritual healing energy practice that many people find comforting and relaxing." Of course, for some people, the words "spiritual" or "healing" or "energy" were a turn-on, and for others, a turn-off. But it seemed to help me determine their initial interest.

My only equipment was a tablet for my music and a folding stool. When I entered the home, I immediately tried to assess where best to offer the session. It was right where the person was when I arrived most of the time. I brought my stool, as it could usually fit right beside the person wherever they were, whether sitting in a chair, on the couch, or in their bed. Wherever the person was most comfortable was what worked for me; it was up to me to adjust.

I wish I could share all my experiences with you, as they were pretty profound. I will share one. Jack was a construction worker and had a rough exterior. Although a Roman Catholic, he had refused to see a priest. He had esophageal cancer and was silent and reserved. I offered him Reiki as he lay on the couch, and he had no external reaction to the session. I came back for a second session the next week, and he seemed to be much more open to receiving Reiki. He went into a deep sleep shortly after I began. The next day, the nurse called me and told me he was like a changed man. He said he had never felt so good in his life. He was so happy to have received the treatment. It took him to another place—a peaceful, calm place. He felt so much better for it. The fear and anxiety previously experienced were gone. He asked for a priest and received the sacraments. I gave him one more treatment a few days later. That night, he had called to his wife. She came out to be with him while he was laying on the couch. When she returned to her bed, he died. Each experience was teaching me a lesson. I was learning that I do nothing. The person does nothing. I just hold that healing space.

At age 80, a couple of years before I left my hospice work, I heard of a Reiki teacher in California working with animals. Her name was Kathleen Prasad. So, I went out to take a course with her at Bright Haven, an animal rescue hospice run by Gail Pope. This step began a relationship that added so much to my life. The story of Kathleen was impressive—a school teacher who was drawn to Reiki by her mother-in-law and became interested in using this modality for animals. Over the years, she developed a unique protocol that she calls the "The Let Animals Lead" method, revolutionizing the approach of offering Reiki to animals. In addition, she created an international Shelter Animal Reiki Association (SARA), which transformed the use of Reiki with the most vulnerable of animals. I have seldom experienced a more dedicated and driven person bringing this gift of Reiki to animals throughout the world.

In 2009, I heard that a teacher from Australia, Frans Stiene, co-founder of the International House of Reiki, was scheduled to teach a class in Virginia. Frans traveled the world teaching Reiki. He offered a three day Shinpiden,

Level III, Usui Reiki Ryoho. There were twenty other students in the class from across the country. After 18 years of practicing Reiki, I needed to step back and evaluate my journey at this point and deepen my practice.

After his first exposure to Reiki, Frans had spent many years researching Reiki in Japan and continues to do so today. For many years he made annual trips to Japan, attempting to follow the spiritual path of Usui. He gained the trust of those who held the knowledge of these spiritual traditions, as they would only share these secret teachings with sincere seekers. After my initial class in Virginia with Frans, I continued to study with him for several years whenever he came to the States. It was to transform the way I both approached and taught Reiki to my students. It strengthened my belief that Usui taught Reiki as a spiritual path first, and the hands-on healing was merely a by-product of your spiritual practice.

Frans taught me that Reiki was not transmitted from the teacher to the student in some magical way. Was it not that we facilitate a process during which the student connects with something they already have, realizing this universal life force energy within themselves?

In his book "Integral Christianity: The Spirit's Call to Evolve," Paul Smith speaks of a river that runs deep underneath everything. He suggests we could dig one well very deep and tap into that river. Or we could dig 20 different shallow ones that may or may not get us there. Some people drill many wells a few feet deep and then complain they could not find any water. What they have not tried is digging deeply into one well. If we are already familiar with a Hindu well, a Jewish well, a Christian well, an Islamic well, or a Buddhist well, why not keep digging deeper into that well? Every major religious tradition has a mystical branch, and they all speak the same language.

In my experience, Reiki speaks that language, which leads me to the river. We were told that Mike Usui's mentor encouraged him to do a 21-day prayer and fasting retreat on top of Mount Kurama because he knew he was ready to go deeper. And look what happened. We are invited to dig deeper and trust.

Bill is a Reiki Master who studied with seven Reiki Masters over the past thirty years and presently teaches Tai Chi and Qigong as a certified teacher through The Institute of Integral Qigong and Tai Chi (IIQTC). Additionally, he is a member of Kathleen Prasad's Shelter Animal Reiki Association. Bill, now 88, continues to teach classes on Zoom. For more information, contact him at www.evolutionaryreiki.com. or wastevens@aol.com

www.reiki.org • Spring 2022 • © Reiki News Magazine