

was brought into the hospital. He was coughing up blood after a car accident. He was a white supremacist, an American Nazi with a swastika tattooed on his chest.

The nurses told me he would not let me touch him. When I came close to him, he spat on me. In that moment, I wanted no part of him, either, but no other physician would take him on. I realized I had to minister to him as best as I could.

I talked to him, but he refused to look at me or acknowledge me. He would only speak through the white nurses. Only they could check his body for injury. Only they could touch his tattooed chest.

As it turned out, he was not badly hurt. We parted strangers.

I still wonder: Was there more I could have done to make our encounter different or better? Could I have approached him differently? Could I have tried harder to win his trust?

I can only guess his thoughts about me, or the beliefs he lived by. His racism, I think, had little to do with me, personally. And, I want to think it had little to do with America, with the faith of Martin Luther King and other great men whose words I heard back in Africa, and who made me believe in this nation's ideals of equality and freedom.

My hands—my black hands—have saved many lives. I believe in my duty to heal. I believe all patients, all human

A Duty to Heal

PIUS KAMAU

GROWING UP IN THE GRINDING POVERTY of colonial Africa, America was my shining hope. Martin Luther King's nonviolent political struggle made freedom and equality sound like achievable goals. America's ideals filled my head. Someday, I promised myself, I would walk on America's streets.

But, as soon as I set foot in America's hospitals, reality—and racism—quickly intruded on the ideals. My color and accent set me apart. But in a hospital I am neither black nor white. I'm a doctor. I believe every patient that I touch deserves the same care and concern from me.

In 1999, I was on-call when a nineteen-year-old patient

THIS I BELIEVE

beings, are equal, and that I must try to care for everyone, even those who would rather die than consider me their equal.

Before coming to the United States in 1971, PIUS KAMAU studied medicine in his native Kenya as well as in Spain and England. In addition to being a thoracic and general surgeon, he writes a column on African issues for the Denver Post. Kamau is organizing medical volunteers to work with him in Sudan.