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Richard Gere

By Susan Barta

Who would have guessed the day would come when Richard Gere, (*Pretty Woman's* Edward) would appear on the cover of *AARP The Magazine*? Receiving the prestigious AARP IMPACT award in February 2005, and front cover spot, Richard Gere is embracing his 55 years and new role as a respected humanitarian and activist. Gere, who started studying with the Gelupa school of Tibetan Buddhism in 1982-83 and has become the most famous of the celebrities accompanying



His Holiness the Dali Lama, is now expressing his teachings through his work as an AIDS activist. "A few years ago I said, 'Look, I have so many years left, maybe, to accomplish something of value,' " said Gere at the AARP award ceremony, "I thought to myself, 'Let me focus on a few big things and see if we can do something there.' "

With musician Phil Glass, Gere founded Healing the Divide, an organization created to "challenge existing, failed modes of thought and action and to foster the kind of revolutionary transformations needed to break the bonds of ignorance, intolerance and injustice." Among the charity's early initiatives: an HIV/AIDS-awareness project aimed at stopping the spread of AIDS in India, a health-care plan for destitute Tibetan monks and nuns, and the development of a culturally sensitive curriculum for high school students in India. Next year, Gere also hopes to bring together leaders in the criminal-justice field to talk about prison reform in the United States.

After becoming a father at 50, Gere gained better understanding and appreciation of his own father, Homer, and views his father's influence as planting the seeds for Gere's drive to make the world a nicer place for the next guy. "My father was, and is, this extraordinary, very gregarious man, an insurance agent in a small town in upstate New York," Gere recalls. "But to him, it was much more than a job. I think he genuinely felt that he was insuring the well-being of his neighbors. He'd get calls in the middle of the night and he'd go off.... As a kid, I didn't understand it. I just knew that my father was gone a lot. And I was kind of jealous of the fact that he was on call to the rest of the world. But as I grow older, I see that that laid seeds in me that express themselves now."

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A musician early in life, he majored in philosophy at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, attending on a gymnastics scholarship. After two years, he left to pursue acting, landing a lead role in the London production of the rock musical *Grease* in 1973. Onscreen, he had a few roles, and gained recognition in *Looking for Mr. Goodbar* (1977), followed by his award winning performance on stage in *Bent*, portraying a concentration-camp prisoner, who has a homosexual encounter, giving rise to rumors about Gere's own preferences. His screen image changed to the sexy, romantic lead in *American Gigolo*, followed by *An Officer and A Gentleman* (1982) and firmly established when he portrayed Edward in *Pretty Woman*, with Julia Roberts. This film made him an international household name, as the VHS sold record numbers world wide. Even the monks in Dharamsala, India, had a copy when Gere returned for more study. Off screen, Gere was linked in tabloid headlines with many international beautiful women, but he married Cindy Crawford in 1991; they divorced in 1995 as rumors of his homosexuality heightened. Afterwards, Richard started dating actress Carey Lowell; they had a son, Homer James Jigme Gere, on February 6, 2000. Richard was picked by *People* magazine as their Sexiest Man Alive in 1999. Richard is an accomplished pianist and music writer. Above all, Richard is a humanitarian. He's a founding member of Tibet House, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of Tibetan culture. Richard has been an active supporter of Survival International for several years; that's a worldwide organization supporting tribal peoples, affirming their right to decide their own future and helping them protect their lives, lands, and human rights.

Rajiv Mehrotra, for the Indian national television channel Doordarshan, interviewed Gere in 1994 about his study of Tibetan Buddhism and changed life. "There is a lot of work on the mind and intellectual play and exploration of reality itself, using language and pure logic, along with various techniques of meditation. It's a gradual process as the mind is familiarized with another way of seeing things and, hopefully, the correct way. So it is a process that takes several lifetimes, but if within a lifetime one can see gradual change."

Speaking with Harry Smith of CBS's *The Early Show*, Gere said, "You and I are not separate. The Iraqis and us are not separate. Even Saddam Hussein and us, we are not separate. We're all in this together, all deeply connected.

"And we can start bridging that divide. The primitive ignorant divide of that, then wars go away. All wars go away."

When asked if people should listen to him, he replied, "No. They shouldn't listen to me; they should listen to their own hearts."

Gere's hands-on style of activism stems from his understanding that he is in a unique position to bring people together, to become what Buddhists call a bodhisattva, a person who, motivated by compassion, dedicates himself to ending the suffering of others. "Look, my basic thing is all-inclusiveness," says Gere. "Everyone gets on the bus with me: bad guys, good guys, the Christians, the Arabs, the Jews, the Buddhists, everybody. That's what I found so touching about the men and women who lost their lives in the twin

towers. Those firefighters and cops and rescue workers, they didn't ask any of those people they saved, are you a good guy or a bad guy? They didn't ask, What's your religion? They didn't look at what color you are. They saved everybody. They were true bodhisattvas."

*Producer **Susan Barta** has been a member of a New Thought center since birth, and is the daughter of Bettie Barta, a Unity minister. With Rev. Barta, Susan produced a weekly radio talk program for Unity North Truth Center, airing on a college owned public broadcast station and streaming to the internet. The program was awarded the Templeton Radio Grant. Susan has written several narrative screenplays and a novel, "The Case of Intent" which has a Truth student as the lead character. She is also a masters candidate finishing her degree in Producing Film and Video at American University. Susan may be contacted via producer@toucanfilms.com*

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