Chain Reactions: Poetic Justice

Zimbabwe actor turns activist

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Zimbabwe was born in 1980 after a long uprising against the minority-white government. Many of the young people fighting for the rights of blacks thought that their days of struggle were over. But for those like Elliot Magunje, intense, personal battles lay ahead.

In 1986, his wife died in a car crash. Six years later, Magunje, then 30 and a prominent actor, found out he had HIV after giving blood -- a discovery made even more eerie by the fact that he had just completed a film in which his on-screen wife and child died of AIDS. To make matters worse, in 1996 his serostatus was made public against his will when CNN, after interviewing him about HIV and guaranteeing that the piece would not be shown in Zimbabwe, aired the piece there accidentally.

After his diagnosis he attempted suicide three times, but the gods were smiling on him because after coming across what he now calls a “good information package,” he realized he was not going to die right away. So he threw himself into AIDS activism by volunteering for The Centre, one of Zimbabwe’s largest AIDS service organization. In the process, he uncovered a hidden talent: poetry writing. The Centre has used several of his intensely personal poems to raise AIDS awareness: despite the fact that more than one-fifth of Zimbabwe’s people are HIV positive, those who live with the virus bear a debilitating stigma.

Today, Magunje serves as The Centre’s information, education and communications officer, carrying him outside his office “into a variety of art forms including poetry, drama, film and television and proactive journalism for local columns on HIV/AIDS issues,” he says. Asked now about his own illness, Magunje says, "In my language, Shona, we say, ’*Yadeuka yadeuka mukaka haudyorerwe*,’ meaning ’Do not cry over spilt milk.’ I have replaced my tears with energy to rebuild my immunity and help to reorganize our silenced and ostracized community."

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