Editor’s Letter

Swimming With Sharks

August 1, 2006 By Regan Hofmann

Before I was diagnosed, I often wondered how I would react if I suddenly found myself facing death. The first time I flirted with the Grim Reaper I was 17. I was driving down a country road when a wasp flew into my shoe and stung my foot. While trying to rip off the shoe (and drive at the same time), I flipped and totaled the family station wagon. I walked away from the crumpled, smoking Oldsmobile thinking how ironic it’d be to survive the wreck only to have my father kill me. That I should have died but didn’t reinforced my belief that I was invincible—a youthful illusion I’ve long since junked.

Brush with death No. 2 came five years later, while I was swimming in Costa Rica. A riptide sucked me into the ocean. I swam over a coral reef and, exhausted and bleeding, was trying to swim back to shore when, in a parody of *Jaws*, eight fins appeared in the water around me. I finally had my answer to what I would do in a critical situation: panic. Screaming, I started flailing my legs and arms. But the fins were attached to the backs of dolphins, that had come to save my sorry floundering self. They took my outburst as a sign that I didn’t need their help and swam away. It still wasn’t my time.

Flash-forward seven years when my doctor told me I had one year to live. It seemed like the third and maybe final strike. Before, I had narrowly averted tragedy by accident. Now, perhaps, my time had come. My doctor told me that I was HIV positive and that, because of a massive viral load and scant T cells, I didn’t have much time (it turns out, I was diagnosed during seroconversion, before my body had time to stabilize after the initial onslaught of the virus). My doctor stared at the tips of his tasseled loafers to avoid looking me in the eye, and I said—with a vehemence that shocked us both—“No way.” I don’t know where my determination to live came from in that moment, but I flat-out refused to believe that I was dying.

I have met many people who have survived things expected to kill them, from plane crashes to horse-riding accidents to cancer to AIDS. And I have wondered whether there was a formula for survival. I did some research and found that while there are many paths to staying on this planet, the resolutions and emotional tools used by those who prevail are similar. For starters, I’ve never met a survivor who was willing to lie down and die. (For other critical secrets to survival, see “Vital Signs.”)

The day that HIV caught me by surprise, I didn't panic. I just sat there, telling myself over and over that it would be OK. What was different about that day from my first two near fatalities was that there was something I could do about HIV. During the car wreck and the day of the dolphins, I'd just been lucky. (Had I not been wearing my seat belt or had those been sharks in Costa Rica, I wouldn't be writing to you now.) I decided not to test my luck with HIV; from the very beginning, I have taken an active role in living. A sense of control can be a very useful tool for survival.

Another is acceptance. Living is about balancing the reality of mortality with the desire for survival. We need to accept death, while fighting it off until we have no other choice. One thing's for sure: I'm headed to the grave. Another is this: I'm gonna die trying to live.

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