Heartbreak Hotel

A friend invites Lillian Thiemann to take a stroll down memory lane, but that road's so rocky she trips over the contradictions.

January 1, 2001 By Lillian Thiemann

My memories are something I'm mostly successful at living with. But sometimes, sitting in a group at a party while people laugh about their misspent youth, I feel lost. I can't relate to all the whimsical stories -- the drunken parties in school and sex in the bushes, pot-inspired songwriting and aspirations to fame. Most of these memories -- the ones they'll admit to -- are recalled with pleasure and bravado, as if they're bragging that they were cool to have done it and lucky to have survived. They use the same tone when telling of their bouts of wild, unprotected sex -- the ones they "should've" gotten AIDS from but didn't. Their "crazy" recollections strike me as so pale and tame, I occasionally wish they were mine. But at other times their "Whew-that-was-a-close-one" attitude really sets me off.

Like the other day, when I was walking along with an acquaintance, on the way to catch a movie downtown. As we passed by the Chelsea Hotel, this guy (one of those people who escaped the consequences of his gleefully unsafe behavior) began to go on about how much he loved this bohemian icon; how, historically, it had been the "in" place for artists; what a cool and trendy place it still is today, blah, blah, blah... What he didn't know -- what I didn't know him well enough to tell him -- was that I had once lived there and shot dope with some of the people he was so impressed with. His voice winked out as my mind ricocheted back to those years: How the first man I ever loved to die of AIDS had lived there. The night a fire started by an alcoholic on the hotel's second floor killed another man I was crazy in love with and set to marry. While this self-satisfied, unaware, HIV negative guy chatted on, I fast-forwarded through the subsequent months during which I continued to shoot dope and coke with a vengeance, even after I found out I was pregnant with my dead lover's baby. I remembered the nasty miscarriage that followed, a direct result of my continued drug use, and how I thought my life was over -- at 24 years old. As an addict, it seemed, I was incapable of birthing anything but ugly memories. Who does this guy think he is, I asked myself, wrapped up in his safe fantasies -- and why do people like him feel it's so appropriate to share?

People who are young, or just vulnerable, hear these war stories -- the kind where people do crazy, unsafe things but escape death, loss and HIV -- and imagine that they, too, will escape. But it's dangerous to unwittingly take these stories as lessons learned. I thought I'd escaped, too -- until, in 1989, after a few years clean from drug addiction, I tested HIV positive. When I heard that word positive I was overcome with anger, and I knew that the price I had paid for my dope-fiend

memories was too high.

Yet this was all the life I had, and I made the decision not to respond to the news by going back to the behavior that got me there. A lot of addicts accumulate harsh memories while using dope and then keep using to cover them up. Many of us end up testing positive or going to prison. It’s easy at the low moments to believe that we’ll never again experience joy. But one step at a time, using every tool I could find -- 12 step, therapy, support groups -- I started to change my attitude. My supply of joyful memories is deep now: being able to show up day after day to help a dying friend, something I never could have done while using; catching the morning light on the rocky outcropping near my window; watching someone’s face as they finally understand the treatment concept I’m teaching. I collect these images like raindrops and drink them when I’m thirsty.

Today, I don’t regret the past, but I don’t shut the door on it either. Instead, I share both kinds of memories with other drug addicts. Sharing the painful memories keeps recovery “green” for me, reminding me of how sick I was for so long and how I could hit that low again anytime I forget where I came from. Sharing my more recent pleasant memories gives hope to other people I know who are still trapped in their addictions: the hope that there’s another life out there and many new memories to make.

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